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Character:	Angela "Mercy" Ziegler , Genji Shimada , Fareeha "Pharah" Amari , Ana Amari , Reaper Gabriel Reyes , Soldier: 76 Jack Morrison , Reinhardt Wilhelm , Mirembé , Hanzo Shimada , Tekhartha Zenyatta , Aleksandra "Zarya" Zaryanova , Mei-Ling Zhou , Winston , Satya "Symmetra" Vaswani
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Equilibrium

by [caesurae](#)

Summary

It's strange how accustomed you become to Drifting with someone, how familiar you become with your partner.

And then it fades away and leaves an empty void in its wake and Angela feels unbalanced, unsettled, like a set of scales weighing down too heavily on one side, like a windblown leaf without a place to land, like the lonely eagle that can't find a current of warm air to bear it home.

She yearns for equilibrium.

Notes

I wrote this beast of a oneshot in under a week. I probably won't write fanfiction for another month because I'm so exhausted....

Many thanks to commander-roastedwolf for being absolutely fantastic and encouraging after seeing the first 9k of this fic. Seriously, Wolf, thanks! You gave me the motivation to finish this behemoth. And what a behemoth it turned out to be. No kidding: this was meant

to be 12k. Also: this fic only loosely follows the plot of the movie. I've taken some liberties with the plot, etc. This is un-beta'd. I'm so tired. I've had so much caffeine. I can taste sound.

Anyway, I hope that you enjoy, and leave a comment if you do!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

KAIJU (怪兽 kaijū, Japanese) Giant Beast.

JAEGER (yā'gar, German) Hunter.

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"There are things you can't fight. Acts of God. You see a hurricane coming, you get out of the way. But when you're in a Jaeger, suddenly, you can fight the hurricane. You can win."

—Raleigh Becket, *Pacific Rim*.

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In another life, Angela Ziegler might have been a doctor.

In this life, she nearly was.

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She's sixteen. A highly gifted student. She is already studying university subjects while finishing her secondary education, and tells her proud parents that she will be a doctor. Her father, a surgeon himself, beams and wipes away a tear. Her mother, who is a major in the army, hugs her tightly and declares her pride.

She lives a good life. They have a nice house in Zurich. Angela has a handful of friends, a bright and clever bunch that never fail to make her laugh. Her father's mother lives in their house, and they make a happy little family of four. Switzerland has a long history of neutrality, and because of this, her mother has never been deployed overseas.

Angela lives a good life. A happy life. She has plans for the future. She thinks that she knows *exactly* what she will become.

She's sixteen when the two police officers come to her house early one Sunday morning, hats held in their hands, faces grave, eyes heavy. They knock on the door. Angela answers.

They ask if this is the Ziegler residence. *Yes*, she murmurs, wondering why they want to know that. The police officers ask to come inside. Then grandmother is there, and she recognises the grim burden that the police officers bear: *no*, she whispers, and begins to break apart before Angela's eyes. *No no no*.

Her parents had gone on their customary early Sunday morning walk. There had been an accident. A car had veered off the road and ploughed into a group of pedestrians making their way into a park. Her parents had been among that group. She pictures them: father in his long grey coat and wearing his favourite blue knitted hat – the one with the ear flaps – and mother in her puffy green jacket, hair in a messy bun and laughing at her husband's antics.

They're dead.

Her parents are dead.

Grandmother cries. Angela comforts her as best she can, and wonders why she herself isn't crying. Surely she should be. The police officers make cups of tea.

"If there is anything we can do...." Says one officer, too young to be delivering messages of death. He can only be three years older than she is, she thinks numbly.

Angela, sixteen, nods and stares bleakly at a wall covered in family photographs, and stirs her tea.

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She cries, later.

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She runs.

Not *away* from things. She deals with the grief as best she can. Her friends are there. Her grandmother is gentle and understanding and grieves with her. Her Taekwondo instructor, who is not unaccustomed to grief, is also understanding.

She runs. She runs for solitude and calm. She runs in the rain. When it snows, she goes to the gym and runs on a treadmill.

Angela runs and studies and visits her parents' graves each weekend. She brings different flowers. Roses. Bright daisies. Carnations.

She runs in the rain and thinks about saving people.

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Grandmother passes away two weeks before she turns eighteen.

Angela says her goodbyes in a tiny hospital room.

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Another funeral. Three in just over two years.

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A relative she's never even heard of is her legal guardian for all of two weeks before Angela turns eighteen. The family lawyer says, "Your great-aunt called to say that she cannot make it down from Norway until next month."

Angela says, "I know she is very busy. Perhaps it is best if she does not come at all."

.

The house is empty. Her lonely footsteps shatter the silence.

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Mirembe brings over pizza and whiskey and that's how they celebrate Angela's eighteenth birthday. She's certainly not up to having a party, and her friends all understand.

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Here is Angela Ziegler, the only remaining member of her family to bear the Ziegler name.

Here is Angela Ziegler, who is only eighteen, and has endured so much.

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The death tolls from the Kaiju are reported on television and in the newspapers.

Fishing Crew of 23 Killed.

358 Civilians Killed as Kaiju Breaches the Miracle Mile.

Patrol Vessel Capsized, 18 Dead.

Cargo Ship Destroyed by Kaiju, 43 Lives Lost.

120 Civilians in Remote Settlement Killed.

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Tacit Ronin and its pilots save three fishing vessels from a Kaiju.

They save 45 lives out in the ocean, and prevent a great many deaths by killing the Kaiju before it makes landfall.

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She runs. She trains. She studies.

More flowers are laid before unweathered headstones.

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"How are you going?" asks Mirembe, Angela's Taekwondo instructor. It's a Saturday morning. They're having coffee together.

Angela curls her fingers around her warm cup of coffee. She thinks.

“I’m alright,” she replies eventually. “It...hurts...but I’m alright.”

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There’s a girl with a soft smile and eyes like amber who works at the local café. She’s very pretty.

Angela turns her down gently.

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There’s a girl with a barely-there smile and eyes that speak of pain and grief.

They have a one-night stand. It’s easy. Simple. No commitment.

They don’t know each other, but they understand each other.

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The Jaeger called Echo Sabre falls to a Kaiju called Sevenclaw.

Reyes and Amari, piloting Shadow Spectre, take down Sevenclaw. They’re both veteran Rangers, but this is their first kill together.

Angela watches the news and wonders if this will ever end. If the Kaiju will ever be defeated.

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Her professors tell her that she is clever. *Very clever.*

You will be an excellent doctor, they say. You will be an incredible surgeon, they say. You could be a pioneer, one says.

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Kaiju fall.

Jaegers triumph.

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Jaegers fall.

Kaiju triumph.

Kaiju fall.

She wonders what it would be like to –

No.

That’s ridiculous.

.

She has a reoccurring dream where she pilots a Jaeger with someone she knows as well as she knows the back of her own hand.

She wakes up to an empty house and drives the remnants of the dream from her mind, thinking,

that's ridiculous.

Reinhardt Wilhelm is an instructor in Krav Maga, and runs his own club. He teaches classes at the local martial arts gym on Wednesday and Friday nights, after the Taekwondo club has finished. He comes early, and he watches them work through patterns, self-defence, board breaking, and sparring. Angela is training for her third dan, now. She assists in the teaching of classes, and is a junior instructor.

Mirembe's glad for her help. Angela's glad she can help Mirembe. Teaching students is calming. It brings her some measure of happiness.

One day, after class has finished, Wilhelm waves her over to where he is waiting by the doors.

"My classes are small," he says. "I could use some new students."

Lips twitching, she says, "I'm quite light and small, compared to most of your students."

"But you are *strong*. I have seen you kick through four boards. You have incredible stamina and discipline. And I see you watching my class warm up as you leave. Stay for one session." Earnestly, he adds, "I want to teach you to throw someone. This is a beautiful thing, *throwing*, and I think you will like it."

So.

She stays for a session, and loves it.

Here is the thing: Angela does not expect to love Krav Maga. She has been practising Taekwondo since the age of four, her parents having been firm believers in children studying martial arts from an early age. Taekwondo suited. She loves the patterns, the points-based system of sparring, and the boardbreaking. Taekwondo has made her as graceful and as strong as a dancer and she can spin through the air and kick with incredible force. Taekwondo is an old martial art, one with great history. Every pattern has a meaning. The colours of the belts have meaning. She loves this about Taekwondo.

Krav Maga, however – this is a relatively new martial art. This is a martial art developed for the Israeli Defence Forces that draws upon techniques from judo, aikido, wrestling, and boxing. Krav Maga is an art for *fighting*, with an emphasis on powerful counter-attacks that can leave an enemy devastated.

She attends the Krav Maga class thinking she will be the smallest there, yet there is a man who is two inches shorter, and a woman who is an inch shorter than that and lighter than Angela. She attends the Krav Maga class thinking she will look out of place, yet she doesn't.

So.

Angela stays for a session, and loves it.

Mirembe sees no problem with Angela taking up Krav Maga. In fact, she encourages it.

And so Angela begins to learn Krav Maga.

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She cannot explain exactly *why* she loves it so, but perhaps it is because of what she can accomplish at these training sessions. Perhaps it is because Krav Maga shows her what she is capable of and drives her to achieve more, to get faster, stronger, to block that blow and throw her opponent easier, more smoothly.

One night, Reinhardt says she is a good student, and smiles proudly.

His praise makes her smile warmly for the rest of the night.

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He teaches her to throw and it *is* a beautiful thing: it is about momentum and balance and where you keep your centre of balance and weight. He teaches her how to throw, and how to land, and she loves it.

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Life goes on.

A few years pass by.

She runs. Studies. Trains. Lays flowers before headstones that are becoming weathered.

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A new generation of Jaegers.

The Kaiju get bigger and bigger.

.

“When does this end?” demands a politician on-screen. *“When do we defeat the Kaiju? How do we defeat the Breach?”*

There are rumbles of a wall being built.

The Marshals of the Shatterdomes, and the scientists and engineers that serve in the Shatterdomes, and the PPDC Rangers who pilot the Jaegers are all staunchly against any kind of wall.

“A wall.” Gabriel Reyes shakes his head. Beside him, Ana Amari is staring grimly at the cameras. The two of them look every inch the heroes that they are, wearing their formal uniforms, faces hard, jaws stern. *“You mark my words: no damn wall will stop a Kaiju. If it won’t smash through, then it will climb right over.”*

.

There’s an incident outside of a bar.

She puts her training to good use and feels *alive*. She feels like lightning in a human form. She feels *powerful*.

She doesn’t feel the cut on her arm till one of her friends points it out.

.

“You could join the special forces,” one of the police officers jokes. “Subduing those three without causing them serious injury? That’s incredible, Miss Ziegler.”

“Were you scared?” asks the doctor who stitches her arm.

Angela stares at him, suddenly troubled by the question, and murmurs, “Not enough.”

“You did well,” Reinhardt tells her, during the customary Sunday dinner at his house. He’s proud. “You did *so* well, Angela.”

“I wasn’t scared,” she says quietly. “There was a knife and I wasn’t scared.”

“Weren’t you?” He places his forearms upon the table and leans forward. “Perhaps you were. Perhaps you pushed past the fear. Perhaps there was not time to be scared and you acted instinctively, using your knowledge without thought.” He smiles gently. “It is okay, Angela. You did well.”

Reinhardt jokes that she is meant for *great things* and she smiles and wonders what use a surgeon could have for Krav Maga and Taekwondo and running every morning without fail.

There’s a photo of her mother and a dozen fellow soldiers all geared up and absolutely filthy from a long training exercise in the hills. They’re smiling and grinning, teeth bright white against the green paint and mud on their faces.

There’s a photo of her father and a team of other doctors and nurses, grinning wearily at the camera after a marathon surgery that ended in success. They’re tired and worn, but their eyes are bright, and their smiles are radiant.

She looks at the two photos and hopes that she will make them both proud.

She dislocates a finger during Krav Maga one night and pops it back into place without a second thought. It’s not until later, when Kimiko – Reinhardt’s right-hand – pulls her aside and says, with an odd look on her face, “I thought I was seeing things, before. Did you dislocate your finger?”

Angela shows Kimiko her hand and her swollen index finger, and Kimiko nods and studies her and says, “You are a strong young woman, Angela.”

She’s not just talking about the fact that Angela dislocated her finger and put it back into place without flinching.

She’s twenty-two and studying at medical school when the Pan Pacific Defence Corps send someone to come and see her. They don’t just send *anyone*; they send Morrison. He’s not a pilot anymore, and certainly not as recognised as Reyes and Amari, but he’s the Marshal of the Alaskan Shatterdome. Angela knows who he is, that’s for certain.

And he knows who she is. That's the strange thing. He just turns up outside of one of her classrooms and holds out a hand.

"Jack Morrison."

"Angela Ziegler." She balances several textbooks in one arm and shakes his hand, conscious of the amazed stares from other students. This is Jack Morrison, former pilot of Romeo Blue, one of the very first Jaegers. "Can I help you?"

"As a matter of fact," Jack Morrison says, "you can."

He takes her out to coffee, talks to her in a hesitant and slightly awkward way that means he's not quite sure how to move on to speaking about why he's really here. So, while stirring a teaspoon of sugar into her coffee, she says, "You can't honestly be considering me as a recruit."

It's the only explanation for why he's here. They must want her to work in the medical corps of the PPDC.

Surprise flickers across his face before being replaced with approval. Morrison regards her levelly. "Why not?"

"I am twenty two. I am going to be a doctor in a few years, but not yet. And I'm Swiss, not from one of the Pacific Rim nations."

Jack Morrison blinks once. "We aren't asking you to join the medical corps, Angela, and your nationality is of no concern to us." His lips twitch. "Rangers aren't always soldiers, you know. Sometimes they don't come from military backgrounds. Sometimes, they're athletes...or students studying medicine."

The title of Ranger is given to members of the PPDC who pilot Jaegers. *Rangers*, he says, and *students studying medicine*, and she chokes on her coffee.

"You must be – you cannot be *serious*."

Surely he is joking. She stares at him intently, and Jack Morrison meets her gaze and smiles faintly.

"I'm serious."

This is ridiculous, she thinks. *Most* Rangers come from military backgrounds: Reyes and Amari were decorated officers, and both belonged to the special forces of their respective militaries. Some said Amari was the best sniper in the world before she joined the PPDC.

Morrison was a soldier too, once.

Morrison has a mouthful of coffee before setting his cup down onto the table. "This is why we are interested in you," he begins, and his voice is filled with this sort of conviction and assuredness that makes her listen. "This is why we want you to be a Ranger candidate. You run five miles every day. Even in the rain. If it's snowing, you go to the gym, and you run five miles on a treadmill. You have a third degree black belt in Taekwondo, and you've been training at a Krav Maga club for four years. Last month, you were leaving a bar with your friends, and three people tried to mug you. Two men and a woman. They all had knives. You subdued them quickly, efficiently, and were only injured once."

A shallow slash to the outside of her right forearm. "I was careless," Angela says. The scar is long and thin, bright pink against her fair skin.

“It was a minor injury, and it’s incredible that you escaped with only one, considering you were fighting three people armed with knives.” He leans forward, resting his forearms against the table. “You are resourceful. Efficient. A quick thinker. Your reflexes are incredible.” He’s smiling, now. “This is why we are interested.”

She doesn’t ask how they know all this. Instead, Angela tells him, “I am studying medicine because I want to save people.”

“So pilot a Jaeger,” Jack Morrison says, and it’s a challenge and an offer both, “and help to save the world.”

Here is a picture:

A young woman, twenty-two years of age, with sharp blue eyes and a gentle, reserved smile. People look at her and they think, *oh, she looks tired*, or, *she looks like a runner*, or, *I wonder what that scar is from*.

Perceptive people look at her and see the steely strength of her graceful jaw. Perceptive people look at her tired blue eyes and find a certain steadfastness within.

Her mother was a soldier.

Her father was a doctor.

And she is going to go to Jaeger Academy and train to be a Jaeger pilot.

“It seems to be the right thing to do,” she tells their graves. “If it doesn’t work out, I’ll come back home and resume my studies.”

The early autumn wind caresses the back of her neck and tugs at her hair.

She says goodbye, and promises to return one day.

Morrison arranges for her to travel to Kodiak Island, where the Jaeger Academy is located. She says goodbye to her friends, to Mirembe, and to Reinhardt. He cries, and does not hide his tears, and hugs her so tightly that her bones creak.

They have become close over the last few years. Like family.

“Email me,” he says thickly. “Every week. Send photos. Tell me everything.”

“I will,” Angela promises, and smiles gently, her eyes prickling with unshed tears. “I always will.”

She arrives at Kodiak Island just in time for the new semester to begin. There are some candidates that are younger, but most are older: many are soldiers or athletes. Some have applied on their own, others have been asked to attend by officers in the PPDC. Some have even been asked to attend the academy by Rangers themselves.

It's hard. The academy *has* to be hard, if they are to become qualified Jaeger pilots. While not all of them will be assigned to a Jaeger, some will, and the others will join various departments of the Pan Pacific Defence Corps – Jaeger Tech, Kaiju Science, engineering, so on and so forth. But they're all here for that glimmering hope that one day they might pilot a Jaeger and be given the title of Ranger. Each day brings a new challenge, a test, an intense exercise that is completed under the most stressful of conditions. They write essays with hardened veterans shouting and bawling in their ears. They complete quizzes while running laps around the running track, shouting out answers hoarsely and breathlessly. They learn everything there is to know about Jaegers and the history of the program. They're woken at 1am, refused sleep for days, made to complete gruelling sessions of exercise before sitting yet another exam.

They learn about the Kaiju, the enemies that they will one day face.

And they fight. They grapple in waist-high pools of freezing water. They fight in the Kwoon Combat Room, sparring with staffs and wooden swords. They learn the 52 positions of Jaeger Bushido. They learn to trust each other, and always eat together in the mess hall, discussing everything they've learned during the day. Weaker students are dropped from the program. Only the strong remain. They drive themselves to be absolutely perfect, nothing less. That brings a sort of camaraderie.

They are all here for the same reason.

To protect people.

She becomes close friends with another student. Genji Shimada. His green hair isn't against regulation, apparently, and he has a wild sense of humour that makes her laugh like nothing else. He's her age, and a professional athlete: he played soccer in the J2 League of Japan, and was even in talks to sign a contract with one of the J1 clubs when Jack Morrison visited a practice session, pulled him aside, and asked him to come to the Jaeger Academy.

They spar together in the Kwoon Combat Room, and what begins as a sparring session becomes an intricate dance of spinning staffs and laughter. In each other, they have found an opponent who can match them. The instructors watch, and write down notes on their clipboards, and nod approvingly.

She and Genji sit together during class and at meal times. It happens instinctively, and they seek each other out subconsciously – without meaning to.

And they run in time, and easily find a steady rhythm. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Genji Shimada run together, side by side, in perfect synchronisation. It happens instinctively.

Drift Compatibility, technically, can be found with anyone. It only requires two things: a rapport to be established, and a certain lack of shyness which can inhibit the sharing of a single headspace.

She and Genji are Drift Compatible. More so than they are with anyone else. This is proven during Drift Sync training, when they are paired together and their Drift bond is recorded as being quickly engaged and quite strong. R.A.B.I.T.s threaten – Random Access Brain Impulse Triggers – but they don't chase the R.A.B.I.T.s, and they sync together easily.

Soon they're in the conn-pod of a real Jaeger, testing it out on the Proving Grounds. The earth

shakes as the Jaeger steps smoothly forward. She and Genji pilot it in perfect harmony, their Neural Handshake with the machine sitting at 100%.

After the practice run, they turn to each other, and share giddy grins. They hug each other tightly, amazed at what they have accomplished together.

She Drifts with other students at the academy, of course – it is a necessary thing. Angela is quite compatible with some candidates, and not so compatible with others. That's to be expected.

She and Genji are more compatible with each other than they are with any others.

Compatible to such a degree that the instructors say that they will easily be able to pilot a Jaeger together.

She almost chases one of Genji's R.A.B.I.T.s, during their second time Drifting together.

There's a man who is walking away. Angela never sees his face and the man never turns around, but he is familiar to Genji. She can sense this much.

From behind her, Genji says, sadly, "That's my father."

Angela turns towards him. "I'm so sorry," she breathes. She feels his pain, his anger, his regret.

"It's in the past, now." He reaches out and grips her shoulder reassuringly, and nods to let her know that he's alright. "Come on."

They move away from that R.A.B.I.T., but then one of Angela's suddenly appears. Three graves lay before them, all bearing the name Ziegler. Then a younger Angela runs past, young and alone, grief sitting heavily upon her shoulders.

Angela tears her eyes away. "My family," she informs him quietly.

"I'm so sorry," Genji echoes, giving the graves one last parting glance.

"It's alright," Angela says softly, and smiles gently.

Then, together, they move on.

"He left Hanzo and I when I was fourteen," Genji tells her that night. All the students of the academy sleep in a long dormitory together, and his bed is next to hers. Despite that, he's currently sprawled across half of Angela's bed. "I came home from school one day and the house was empty. His clothes were gone, so was his laptop, and his phone. He'd left us without saying a word. We always disappointed him, for some reason – I don't know why." He smiles a regretful smile. "We made do without him. Hanzo managed to get a good job as a tutor while attending university. I worked a part-time job while at highschool. Then I was spotted by a professional soccer team and started playing for money." He stares at the ceiling and then adds, "When Jack came to ask me to come to the academy, I thought I could prove myself, and make Hanzo proud. So here I am."

She reaches out and squeezes his hand and says, "Hanzo must be so proud of you already."

“Yes.” Now there’s no regret in his smile, only fondness for his brother. “I think he is.”

Genji and Hanzo’s mother passed away when they were young. Genji cannot remember her.

Hanzo tells him that she was lovely, and kind, and would have been so very proud of him.

They fight Kaiju in simulations and it’s not the *real thing* but it’s as close as they’re going to get, unless they’re actually assigned to an active Jaeger.

Angela and Genji fight well when they are paired with others.

When they are paired together, they begin and maintain a perfect record of deployments versus successful kills.

Soon, twenty-four weeks have flown by. They are to graduate with the other candidates who have made it this far. They will join the ranks of the Pan Pacific Defence Corps, and if they are assigned to Jaegers, they will become Rangers.

Angela wonders if she’s dreaming. Genji pinches her arm and assures her that she is awake.

Before the graduation ceremony, most of the students who are to graduate pile into the only tattoo parlour on Kodiak Island. It’s tradition to get the PPDC insignia – an eagle with its wings outstretched and reaching up, with a five-pointed star between its wingtips – as a tattoo. There are a few students who don’t get tattoos, for reasons of religion and personal beliefs, but for those who, the event is one filled with giddiness and great cheer.

Angela gets her tattoo on her right shoulder.

Genji gets his on his left.

“I hope you aren’t tired of Shimada,” the chief instructor tells Angela, just before the graduation ceremony. “And Shimada, I hope Ziegler isn’t annoying you too much. The two of you are stuck with each other, now.” She smiles at them. “You’ll be piloting together.”

“Piloting?” asks Genji incredulously. Angela’s quite sure that she’s gaping at the chief instructor. “How do you – what do you – what?”

“I can’t tell you any more,” the chief instructor says mysteriously. She sends them on their way, but not before saying, “As for what comes, after graduation – good luck. The two of you have earned it.”

Genji’s brother Hanzo comes to the graduation ceremony.

So do Reinhardt and Mirembé.

They sit together: Reinhardt with his teary eyes and broad shoulders, Hanzo in his neat suit and dabbling at his eyes with a handkerchief, Mirembe lean and lithe and so proud that her face is almost glowing. They sit together, and smile proud smiles, and clap fiercely.

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Jack Morrison comes to the graduation ceremony, too. When it's over, he seeks Angela and Genji out.

"I requested the two of you be stationed at the Alaskan Shatterdome," he tells them after congratulating them both, "but you've got to spend six months in Hong Kong, first. There's something waiting for you there."

"What's in Hong Kong?" asks Genji, blinking.

Morrison's face cracks into a rare smile. Not a twitch of the lips, not a smirk, but a *smile*. He's proud of them both. "A Mark-3 Jaeger that's nearly finished repairs and needs two new pilots."

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The Jaeger is called Sentinel Brave. Its pilots have retired, having reached the age of fifty-five.

Now, Sentinel Brave is to be theirs.

"We will keep watch," Angela murmurs, pressing her hands against freshly painted steel, "and we will stay brave."

Beside her, Genji gazes up at the towering Jaeger with awe in his eyes, and whispers, "We did it, Ziegler. We got our Jaeger."

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Their Drivesuits are white with thin stripes of cobalt blue and grey. The surface of the polycarbonate armour is smooth and unmarked by scratches and wear.

They take photos of themselves, and send them to Hanzo and Reinhardt and Mirembe.

Reinhardt replies with, *You look like proper Jaeger pilots, now.*

Hanzo is so proud that when Genji calls him, the two of them end up crying from sheer happiness.

Angela quietly brings Genji a box of tissues.

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She and Genji get matching tattoos that say ***Sentinel Brave***.

It's tradition.

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Amelie and Gerard Lacroix are stationed at Hong Kong. They pilot a Mark-3 named Tango Assassin, and have been married for three years. Gerard is cheery and roars with laughter often. Amelie is quieter and has a quick, sly sense of humour and a wit like honed steel. They're good people, and Angela and Genji become good friends with them.

Amelie and Gerard teach them how to dance, and how to dance *properly* – "Stop grinding!"

Amelie shouts at Genji. “Just stop! *Merde!* Gerard, please, I cannot do this. He is making fun of me.”

“I would never,” Genji laughs.

Gerard and Amelie are good people.

Good Rangers, too.

Angela and Genji kill a Category II Kaiju in the middle of a fierce storm. It’s 2am – 02:13 exactly – when they break the monster’s neck.

Their first kill is called Yellowspine. Newspapers display bold headlines that read *Young Jaeger Pilots Make Impressive First Kill*. Then there are pictures of Angela and Genji being congratulated upon their return, still wearing their Drivesuits and smiling weary smiles, helmets held under their arms and hair all sweaty and messed.

They’re young.

Only twenty three.

And they’re heroes.

Saviours.

She and Genji get matching tattoos. A single tally mark for the one Kaiju they have killed.

It’s tradition.

Another Category II, this one called Razormaw. Tacit Ronin and Sentinel Brave team up to take it down, and the footage goes viral.

There are interviews, after that. “You’re telling me that you kids are twenty-*three?*” asks one interviewer, his jaw dropping.

Genji smiles slyly and says, “How old did you think we were? I don’t dye my hair to hide any grey, that’s for sure.”

She emails Reinhardt every week.

I am very proud of you, he writes. So very proud.

She smiles at her laptop, and her eyes are blurry.

She and Genji get matching tattoos again. Another tally mark for another Kaiju they have killed.

It's tradition.

.

She wonders if her parents would be proud too.

She wonders if they ever would have wanted this for her.

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In her dreams, Yellowspine and Razormaw tear Sentinel Brave into pieces.

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Genji dreams the same dreams too.

They sleep in the same room, on bunk beds – she won the right to sleep in the top bunk in a coin toss – and they wake each other up from the nightmares, and lay side-by-side in narrow cramped beds, and they talk.

They talk to each other, quiet and reassuring, their voices beacons to bring each other home. Then, usually, they fall asleep – legs intertwined, faces pressed into the other's shoulder or neck, hands resting upon hip or stomach. They fall asleep, breathing in time, hearts beating together.

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There's nothing romantic about it at all. They're purely platonic.

It's still a sort of love that could make the heavens themselves shake.

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The act of Drifting with another person is to reveal every part of yourself and see them do the same. It is a deeply personal thing.

It's no surprise that close relationships form. She and Genji are closer than best friends. "Platonic soulmates," he whispers one night, just when they're getting ready for bed. "That's what we are."

And it's a wonderful thing, in all honesty.

Some days, Angela doesn't know what she'd do without him.

.

When you can Drift with someone – and Drift *well* – it feels like you can achieve anything. Like you can run a thousand miles without stopping, like you can race the wind itself, like you can walk into the fiercest battle and fight your way through it and come out unscathed.

.

It's like...

...oh, it's like you can reach out and grasp the stars themselves.

.

They run.

Not *away* from things. They run for solitude and calm.

They run, because in the act of running, there's a steady rhythm to be found. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Genji Shimada run together, side by side, in perfect synchronisation.

Here is something poetic:

They are not a matched pair, on the surface.

Genji still dyes his hair green and laughs a loud laugh and winks at good-looking men. Genji is mischievous and loves life loudly and fiercely. Genji is like a cheerful storm, leaving only exasperated laughter and cheer in his wake.

Angela listens attentively and smiles wryly and does not wink at good-looking women, but she *does* look at the women who are interested – and the women *she* is interested in – in a certain way that makes them bite their lips and swallow. Angela is quieter.

She could have been a doctor, with only a few years left of medical school.

He was a professional soccer player, about to sign a contract to join a club in the J1 League.

But they are absolutely brilliant together.

Here is something poetic:

They walk like wolves, all lithe grace and danger. They stride through the Shatterdome hallways together. They run in perfect synchronisation. They spar, and it is beautiful to behold. They dance to make the other pilots laugh – moving imperiously and fluidly around the common room, perfectly in time. They listen to the reports, standing side by side, arms folded, shoulders square, jaws firm.

Here are two halves of a whole that can pilot a Jaeger in synchronisation. Here, beneath their vastly different surfaces, are two people who understand each other better than anyone else. They are not mirror images, and they do not need to be.

Rather, they understand each other.

Rather, they synchronise.

Here is something poetic:

Harmony.

Equilibrium.

Drift Compatibility.

They get transferred to the Alaskan Shatterdome. A Jaeger stationed there - Absolute Danger, a battered old Mark-I – is being retired with its current pilots. Angela, Genji, and Sentinel Brave arrive at the Alaskan Shatterdome on a Friday morning, and are greeted outside by Jack Morrison. He's flanked by Reyes and Amari, who pilot Shadow Spectre together.

"Hey, young guns," greets Reyes, shaking both their hands fiercely. A year ago, Angela would never have thought that one day she would be shaking Gabriel Reyes' hand, or Ana Amari's. "Welcome to Alaska. Cold, isn't it? Jack, they look *so young*." Then he's pinching Genji's cheek, and then Angela's. It's so absurd that Angela can't help her laughter.

"Yes, Gabriel." Jack's smiling a weary and fond smile. "I'm glad to have you both here. I'm sorry that *these two* took it upon themselves to be your welcoming party, however."

Ana Amari grins, sharp and amused. "We'll be giving you the grand tour of this cold and draughty place," she tells Angela and Genji. "Do you like snow? We have a lot of that."

"Oh, yeah," Gabriel says, snow dusting the dark beanie he wears. There's a certain rough sarcasm in him that makes them smile. "Snow everywhere. Tonnes of the fucking stuff."

"Ice."

"Lots of rock. You like rocks?"

"Not a lot of people, however. This isn't Hong Kong." Ana gestures to the desolate wintery expanse that surrounds them. "Do you think you will like it?"

"I think," Angela tells them, with snow settling in her hair and on her shoulders, "that we will love it."

Jesse McCree is the Chief LOCCENT Officer at the Alaskan Shatterdome. He wears a battered old cowboy hat and a belt buckle that says *BAMF*.

Angela and Genji like him immediately.

"Darlin's," he drawls, "I'll be overseein' all your Jaeger related activities, so stay on my good side. Now, we've got a few traditions on base: whenever Marshal Morrison passes by, you gotta blow him a sweet little kiss, and if you run around past midnight then Mama Bear Amari will shoot you with a tranq dart. If Reyes passes out anywhere then you have to take a photo and send it to me, for...reasons. Poker is on Saturday nights. Shimada, why is your hair *green*? I love it."

Ana Amari has a daughter. She tells them that over breakfast the next morning. Genji chokes on his toast and murmurs, "I never knew."

Ana doesn't seem to hear this. She says, "Fareeha returned to Egypt a few days before you two arrived. Pity." A sigh. "I would have liked you to meet her."

"How old?" Angela asks. She's never heard of Ana's daughter either, but such a thing is not unusual. Jaeger pilots tend to keep their families private, if they aren't piloting with them.

As usual, Genji is drinking from her cup of coffee. Angela takes a triangle of toast from his plate

and bites off a corner.

“Nearly nineteen,” says Ana. “She’s decided to join the military, so now she is attending basic training.” Ana quarters an apple and sighs, and murmurs something about *children*.

“Ah.” Angela isn’t quite sure what to say about that, given how Ana seems rather resigned to Fareeha joining the military. “How long is basic training, in Egypt?”

“Three months. I hope she gets a nice posting.”

She doesn’t say it, but Angela hears this: *I hope she doesn’t become a Jaeger pilot.*

.

Later, Gabriel tells them, “Ana doesn’t want Fareeha to join the Jaeger Academy.”

“Is Fareeha going to try?” asks Genji.

Gabriel laughs. “Maybe. She’s a hell of a young woman, and if she does decide to do it, she’ll probably get in. You’d like her, I think.” He shoves his hands in his pockets and sighs. “I’m hoping all this Kaiju business will finish up before Fareeha can apply to the academy, though.” Then his face is grim. “I don’t want to watch my co-pilot’s daughter get in a Jaeger. Not really. I watched her grow up, and if anything happened to her...Ana would be broken.” Gabriel doesn’t speak for a while. Then, at last, with a soft voice, he adds, “Zareen...Zareen always wanted the best for Fareeha too.”

.

A few mornings later, Ana says softly, “I read your files. We both did. It’s...out of habit, to gain a better picture of the Rangers who will be serving alongside us. I’m sorry, Angela.”

It’s just the two of them, walking through the corridors of the Shatterdome. Ana says, “I read your files,” and Angela hears, *I know about your family.*

It takes her a while to respond. It’s always been hard to talk about her parents and her grandmother. She wonders if it will ever get easier, sometimes, and admits as much to Ana.

“It will.” Ana’s eyes are as gentle as Angela has seen them yet. “One day.”

“One day,” Angela echoes, and then shrugs one shoulder. “I’m not sure what they would have thought about this,” she admits. “Mother was a soldier. Father was a doctor. I was going to be a doctor, and now I am a soldier of sorts.” *That’s a strange sort of irony*, she thinks.

“You are a good pilot,” Ana tells her firmly. “They would have been proud of you.” She reaches out and squeezes Angela’s shoulder with a calloused and scarred hand. With a mother’s conviction, she says, “This, I am sure of.”

.

Ana Amari and Gabriel Reyes are *legendary*, even among Rangers. The best of the best.

Ana and Gabriel chatter away in Arabic and Spanish and giggle at Jack. They steal food from the kitchens and make Genji and Angela swear not to tell. They take the most awful photos of people and use them as blackmail – photos of Angela, red-faced and sweaty from a long gym session, Genji making some odd expression, Jack sleeping at his desk with post-it notes stuck to his cheek. They treat Jesse like a beloved younger brother and kiss him upon the cheeks and tease him in

front of the others.

One day, they wake Angela and Genji up at 3am, and drag them out of the Shatterdome and into the sleek SUV that Gabriel and Ana have declared is theirs. They drive to the nearest 24-hour diner and order a truly immense amount of food – waffles and pancakes, sausages and omelettes, scrambled eggs and muffins and fried tomatoes and what seems to be an endless amount of coffee – and the four of them eat, and talk, and laugh.

The waitress, who seems to be quite familiar with Gabriel and Ana, calls them all *honey* and smiles fondly and insists on Gabriel and Ana eating more pancakes, surely they cannot be full?

“We’re *bonding*,” Gabriel explains to Angela and Genji, and chuckles into his omelette.

Really, though, they are.

.

Gabriel and Ana face down a Kaiju a week later and crush its head between Shadow Spectre’s steel hands.

.

There are television interviews and internet videos and *photoshoots*, of all things. Rumours too.

“Of course there are going to be rumours,” Reyes tells them. “You’re both young. Decently good looking, I suppose. You either directly address the rumours, or ignore them. There’s not much else you can do.”

.

Someone once suggested that Ana and Gabriel were together and Gabriel *howled* with laughter, absolutely *howled*, before abruptly falling silent and staring at the journalist who had asked the question. For a long time he stared at the journalist, who began to pale and sweat, before awkwardly changing the subject.

No one asked him to his face again.

No one asked Ana, either.

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Ana’s first partner was her life partner, Zareen. Her best friend in childhood, and her other half in adulthood.

Gabriel first piloted with his sister, Maria.

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The life of a Ranger can be so very cruel.

Zareen was killed during a fight with a Kaiju. Ana was forced to pilot on her own for twenty minutes.

Maria was killed in a car accident.

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They say that Ana and Gabriel first met at the Alaskan Shatterdome. They looked at each other in silence, before nodding and then heading to the Kwoon Combat Room.

They each chose a staff. Then they began to spar.

They left that room as partners, co-pilots.

“Now – I hope I don’t offend by asking this question – but is there anything between the two of you? Anything of a romantic nature?”

“Thank you,” Genji says with an impish grin. They’re being interviewed by an American host with a sharp wit and rumbling laugh. The studio audience is cheerfully responsive, clapping and roaring with laughter at all the right times. Angela and Genji are in their formal uniforms, sitting side-by-side on a plush sofa. “Sadly, I am very gay, and Angela tends to prefer the ladies.”

#SentinelBrave starts trending on Twitter, after that.

Ana scowls at Angela and throws her a bag filled with letters. “All for you. Half of them are probably love letters and marriage proposals.”

Genji says, in a disbelieving tone, “This *soccer player* asked me out on a date over Twitter.” He shows them the tweet.

“Romance is dead,” Reyes laughs and shakes his head. “Back in my day, we used to send texts. Or actually ask people out face-to-face.”

“I,” Ana says, “used messenger pigeons, myself.”

“And they delivered messages that she thought were charming. ‘Let me shoot an apple off your head from seven hundred metres.’ ‘Let’s clean rifles together.’” Gabriel scoffs. “How very *charming*.”

Ana punches his shoulder. “Stop telling them all my embarrassing secrets, Reyes.”

They start to bicker, after that. Angela gives up on sorting through the letters. Genji stretches his legs out on the couch and places his feet on her thighs. Jack pops his head in to ask Gabriel something, and ends up staying for a glass of cognac. Ana sends Jesse a text telling them to join them, and he does. The room is filled with laughter.

It’s nice.

Comfortable.

Genji and Angela are sparring in the Kwoon Combat Room the day that Fareeha arrives. It’s been just over three months since their arrival at the Alaskan Shatterdome, and no Kaiju have come up north recently, not since Gabriel and Ana killed the last. Still, skills have to be kept sharp. Gabriel and Ana are watching them spar, shouting out encouragement and calling out when points are scored.

They know Fareeha’s due to arrive today, but not when. She has a week of freedom before she

has to report to her new posting. Only a *week*.

Ana is tense. Nervous. She keeps looking towards the door and checking her phone. Gabriel is eager too, though he's certainly not as restless as Ana.

On the mats, Angela and Genji continue to spar. The sound of hardened wood clacking against hardened wood fills the room, alongside measured breathing and the quiet rustling of bare feet darting across the padded surface of the floor.

Clack-clack-clack. Genji ducks. Angela sweeps out with her staff. He deflects the blow, and strikes out. For each point he lands, she lands another. Equilibrium. Harmony. Drift Compatibility.

Ana suddenly shouts, in a tone that is furious and shocked and *piercing*, "You got a *tattoo*?"

Angela freezes for a split second, but it's a split second too long. Genji's staff jerks up, hits Angela in the face and the cartilage of her nose *crunches*. She curses loudly in three languages and hurls her staff at the ground. "*Mein Gott!*" she snaps, pain bursting through her face, eyes blurring. "You broke my nose!"

Genji's quite taken aback by the entire thing. He stares at her with wide eyes, and says in an alarmed rush, "I am *so* sorry."

"It's alright," Angela mutters, blood already dripping onto the floor. She mutters another curse. "It isn't your fault. I'm sorry for shouting."

Genji blinks and asks her not to apologise because it's scaring him, just a little.

Gabriel restrains his laughter and shouts, "We need a medic! Ziegler, is it bleeding? Show me. Come on, honey. You want a band-aid?"

Angela ignores them and strides over to the mirrors set upon the far wall. Blood is running from her nose, dripping from her chin, splattering onto the floor and her sparring clothes. Clenching her teeth, she reaches up with two hands, and firmly realigns the cartilage of her nose.

When she turns around, Ana's daughter is staring at her with wide eyes.

And that is how she meets Fareeha Amari: covered in her own blood and scowling, having just reset her nose without any visible sign of pain.

She certainly makes an impression on Fareeha, according to what Ana later tells her.

"You can't ground me, mother. I am an adult."

"I have birth to you," Ana mutters furiously, gesturing at Fareeha with a spoon. It's dinner time, and they're in the mess hall. "I raised you. I am *allowed* to be angry. You cannot just go and get tattoos. Did you research the place? Did they use hygienic equipment?"

"Yes, mother."

Angela slowly eats her soup and tries not to smile. Genji is laughing into his glass of water.

"Are you sure? It looks red. *Fareeha!* It looks inflamed!"

"That tends to happen when a needle pierces your skin repeatedly, mother."

Genji coughs.

Ana Amari's lips thin. "Are you being sarcastic?"

"No," Fareeha Amari replies, with just the faintest amount of sarcasm in her tones.

Ana sighs and grumbles. Then she smiles at her daughter. "I have missed you. The Udjat looks good on your face. It suits you, *habibti*."

Flushing with pride, Fareeha looks at her mother and says, softly, "Thank you, mother." Angela and Genji stay quiet. It's a nice moment, and they don't want to interrupt.

"How's the nose?" asks Gabriel about a minute later, sitting down opposite Angela with a tray piled high with food. "That's some decent bruising that's coming up." He reaches out and tilts her head to one side gently, examining her face and shaking his head with a sigh. "It's a good look, I suppose."

"Isn't it beautiful?" asks Angela wryly. "An engineer flinched when she saw me, just before. I have such a strange and wondrous effect on women."

Fareeha chokes on her soup.

.

Angela never knows this, but later, Ana takes Fareeha aside and hugs her for a very long time, and says, "Zareen would have been so *proud* of you, *habibti*."

Angela never knows this, but Fareeha – who does *not* cry – cries.

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"What on earth happened to you?" Jack asks, grimacing at the sight of her face. "You get kicked in the head by a horse?" His lips twitch a little. Then his features settle back into concern, and he peers closely at her swollen bruised face, an eyebrow raised, waiting.

"Genji decided that he was tired of me and he took to me with a staff."

Genji makes a strained noise deep in his throat. "I – *no*. It was a sparring accident. Ana shouted in alarm, Ange froze, and I swept my staff up in shock."

"I liked the first one better," Jack says dryly.

Angela laughs and winces at the pain that bursts through her face. Genji rolls his eyes. Jack chuckles all the way back to his office.

.

She sends Reinhardt a picture of her face and writes, *There was a sparring accident. Blood everywhere. Hardly pretty, as I am sure you can imagine.* A photo of Genji pouting and looking guilty. *Here is the guilty party.*

He emails back with, *You would have looked like a Valkyrie, all fierce and avenging.*

She reads the email and laughs and winces and laughs again. Genji gives her painkillers and water and apologises profusely.

She forgives him. It's not his fault, and it's *funny*, honestly.

And yes, she takes a little delight in emailing Hanzo and writing, *I regret to tell you that your brother broke my nose this morning*. She sends him a photo of her bruised face and laughs painfully when Genji asks why she looks so pleased with herself.

.

Dear brother, reads Hanzo's reply. *You have previously told me that you are very glad that Angela – who you describe as wonderful, and kind, and magnificent – is your partner. I wonder why, then, you have broken her nose in sparring? It seems most cruel, Genji. Has she offended you somehow? Did she tell you to stop dying your hair that ridiculous shade of green?*

.

Fareeha knocks on her door that evening. "Ranger Ziegler," she says, quiet and apologetic. "I am sorry about your nose."

"It's alright," Angela tells her reassuringly. "It's not your fault." She smiles wryly and says, "If anything, it's your mother's." A beat. "But *please* don't tell her I said that."

Amused laughter bursts from Fareeha's lips. "I won't."

"Call me Angela, by the way. Not Ranger Ziegler." She gestures to Genji, sitting at the table inside their room and reading a book. "You don't have to call him Ranger Shimada. If you want, you can call him Genji the Betrayer."

Genji tosses a pen at her. Without looking, Angela reaches out to one side and catches it.

Fareeha laughs again, quiet and slightly amazed. She comes in, and Genji and Angela ask her about basic training and her new posting, and how she likes the army.

Gabriel and Ana, who seem to have a sixth sense in regards to Fareeha's whereabouts, burst into the room bearing cake and a bottle of golden liqueur about twenty minutes later. Jack and Jesse are dragged along too, and the seven of them eat and laugh and have a very merry time.

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There's a nameless sort of game that Jaeger pilots play with their partners. They throw things at their partner when they aren't looking – books, tennis balls, pens, phones – and the other catches the objects easily enough. It's a way of testing the subconscious awareness between them, keeping reflexes sharp.

It's a testament to how well they work together, really.

Genji and Angela play it during a briefing, on one occasion, tossing a tennis ball back and forth while paying absolute attention to Jack. He hides his smile when he sees what they're doing, and continues to talk.

Reyes and Amari play it in the mess hall with steak knives every night.

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They play soccer against Reyes and Amari and McCree shouts out encouragement from the sidelines. No one is winning, even despite Genji's brilliance at the game – it's 2-2 – and Gabriel picks Angela up and carries her over one shoulder as he runs off the sports court, laughter booming from his chest.

Jack takes a photo of that moment. Ana and Genji both darting towards the ball, while Gabriel runs past Jack with Angela on his shoulder, the two of them laughing and grinning, all dancing eyes and bright teeth.

The game ends in a tie – 5-5 – and they’re all sweaty and cheerful and Genji slings his arm around Angela’s shoulders and their hearts beat in time.

Angela keeps a copy of the photo. So does Genji. So do Ana and Gabriel.

Jack does, too.

There’s a *gala* and Angela thinks it’s ridiculous they have to go. Ana and Gabriel are back in Alaska, probably laughing at the thought of Angela and Genji running away from people asking for autographs and gory descriptions of what it’s like to fight Kaiju. Ana and Gabriel are probably curled up in armchairs drinking whiskey and watching television.

Angela wishes that she was curled up in an armchair, drinking whiskey and watching television.

Genji thinks the party is alright, and is somewhat disappointed that they have to attend in their formal uniforms. He wants to wear a *tuxedo*, he says, a nice black tuxedo with a bow tie. Angela certainly finds the formal uniform more agreeable than wearing a dress.

There’s a politician who thinks that nuking Kaiju is a better solution than fighting them in Jaegers. Angela reasonably tells him the various reasons why this is not so, he responds like a child – no an utter fool, even a *child* has more grace than that – and she and Genji tear him to shreds.

With their words, of course. Not *literally*.

(They want to, though.)

Someone records it on their smartphone and the video is posted online. Gabriel rings them up after the party and doesn’t gloat too much: he says this is why he and Ana tend not to go, because after three glasses of wine Ana becomes a little bloodthirsty and hunts for politicians to intimidate.

“Is Jack angry?” Genji inquires, tugging off his gloves and shoving them through his belt.

Gabriel laughs and says, “*Nah. Kind of proud, actually. We all are.*”

There’s a politician’s daughter staying at their hotel. She is in her last year of studying law and is terrifyingly pretty and smiles the kind of smile people write poetry for. She sees Genji and Angela get out of their taxi and she makes a beeline for them as they enter the foyer, and somehow gets Angela alone while her mother – a senator – makes pleasant conversation with Genji.

Angela turns her down firmly.

“Why are the children of politicians so *scary*?” Genji asks in the elevator. “You see them coming, and someone says, ‘that is this senator’s son’ or ‘that is this governor’s daughter’ and the blood in your veins runs cold and you think, ‘oh no, how will I escape?’ And their *parents* are either glaring at you, or already planning your wedding.”

Angela is still laughing when the elevator reaches their floor.

They fly back to Alaska. Ana and Gabriel pick them up from the airport, pulling up in their sleek SUV. Ana rolls down a tinted window and says, with one arm hanging out the window, “Get in, losers.”

Gabriel smirks and shows them three memes about their argument with the anti-Jaeger politician.

Fareeha sends a picture of herself and her squad-mates, all geared up and grinning at the camera. There’s another photo where they are all striking ridiculous poses, and Fareeha is carrying a rocket launcher on her shoulder, gazing with mock imperiousness into the distance.

“Well,” Gabriel says fondly, “there’s no doubt that she’s your daughter, that’s for sure.”

Ana’s eyes are shining with pride and the crease between her eyebrows speaks of worry.

Fareeha signs up for some engineering courses that the army offers, and is kept busy by her duties and her additional studies.

Ana seems relieved.

Years go by. Soon enough they’ve been Jaeger pilots for four years.

They kill six Kaiju, in this time.

The tally marks are tattooed onto their skin.

Not the names of the Kaiju, though.

They kill six Kaiju. Yellowspine. Razormaw. Yamarashi. Clawhook. Teneyes. Hammertail.

They kill, and they remember, and the Kaiju haunt their dreams.

Gerard dies in a shooting. He was just a bystander trying to save lives.

Angela and Genji go to the funeral. Amelie can barely speak through the grief.

Amelie takes a long stretch of leave and goes back to France. She calls, when she feels up to talking, and with each passing week her voice gets a touch stronger.

One day she laughs, and Angela treasures the sound.

Amelie is not sure if she will ever pilot again.

Two new pilots are assigned to Tango Assassin and both die in their first battle against a Kaiju. It tears the Jaeger to pieces and Tacit Ronin and its pilots cannot save them.

Tango Assassin's first pilots were Gerard and Amelie. It was *their* Jaeger in so many ways – smaller and sleeker than the others, not as heavily armoured but far faster. It was a lethal dancer, just as they were. Gerard and Amelie had teased Angela and Genji about Sentinel Brave, once – *look, just as heavy-footed as you!* And they had laughed in that French way, and Gerard had stomped around the room, saying, *see, Angela and Genji, this is how you both walk. Ha!*

Now Gerard is dead, and Tango Assassin is gone, and Amelie leaves the PPDC.

“I need quiet,” she tells Angela over the phone. *“I need to learn to breathe again.”*

Angela and Genji begin to Ghost Drift. It's a phenomenon that happens when two pilots Drift together for a long time. They dream the same dreams, become aware of what the other is doing or feeling.

It's not uncomfortable. It is what it is. Sometimes, she feels Genji brushing past the edge of her mind. She feels his amusement, his annoyance, his joy. They know when the other is angry, when they are hungry, when weariness takes its heavy toll.

Sometimes Genji says what she's meaning to say. Sometimes she speaks in fluent Japanese and blinks in surprise and the other pilots grin and nod in understanding.

Genji, one day, stubs his toe and unleashes a string of curses in Swiss German, French, English, and Japanese.

She rings Reinhardt and cheerfully asks how he is in Japanese. Reinhardt thinks it's some kind of joke until Angela explains. Then he's quite amazed.

Angela laughs, one night at the bar.

“What is it?” asks Fareeha, at the Alaskan Shatterdome on a short holiday before being redeployed. She'll be an officer, soon, Angela thinks, even though she's only twenty-two. She'll be a good officer.

She's a good soldier.

Angela puts down her empty glass, signals for another beer, then gestures over her shoulder. *“Genji's going to kiss that man over there.”*

Fareeha turns on her stool and then whistles lowly. *“Well,”* she murmurs. *“How did you know?”*

Angela taps one finger against her temple. *“Ghost Drifting.”*

A slow smile stretches across Fareeha's face. *“Really?”*

“Really.”

“Well, then.” Fareeha leans back against the bar and smiles a lopsided smile, clearly amused and impressed. She’s wearing a t-shirt, her jacket long since abandoned, and when she shifts, the strong muscles of her arms flex and lengthen. She’s *attractive*, undoubtedly attractive with her well-muscled and powerful physique, the sharp line of her jaw, the curve of her lips, the proud and imperious lines of the Udjat.

Angela looks away.

The Marshal of the Hong Kong Shatterdome retires. Morrison is to be transferred there and take control of the larger Shatterdome, leaving a void at the Alaskan Shatterdome.

The position is offered to Ana.

Gabriel’s quite cheerful about it. He’s thinking of writing his *memoirs*, he says. He and Ana can still pilot Shadow Spectre, if needed.

Ana will be a good leader. They all agree upon that.

And so Ana becomes Marshal of the Alaskan Shatterdome.

She takes to her new role very easily – she has been operating as Jack’s unofficial second-in-command for many years – and people call her ma’am, not Mama Bear, which makes her roll her eyes and sigh.

Gabriel’s quite annoyed that he doesn’t get a new title, but Angela and Genji call him *sir* laughingly till he chases them off, threatening to teach them a lesson.

Angela and Genji have been pilots for five years.

They’ve killed seven Kaiju, now. The latest is Longfang, a lumbering monster that they punch into submission before breaking its neck under Sentinel Brave’s foot.

Genji and Angela have seven tally marks, now, and Longfang haunts their dreams with the others.

There’s movement in the Breach. Angela and Genji wake up, get dressed, and stride through the hallways of the Shatterdome. They walk in sync, subconsciously, like they have for so long now.

A Category III has crawled out of the Breach. It’s heading north. Sentinel Brave is deployed to take it out.

They get into their Drivesuits. The circuitry suit goes on first, a sleek body suit rather resembling a wet suit laced with synaptic processor mesh, designed to allow the pilots to feel everything that the Jaeger does – pain, of course, is dulled. Then the armoured plates of the Drivesuit go on over the top, and after that, they put on their helmets and then make their way to the conn-pod. “You should ask that guy out,” Genji says when they’re locking themselves into the operating mechanisms. “You know, from science.”

McCree laughs over comms and says, “*Sure, why not. He’s cute, ain’t he?*”

“Not as cute as you,” Angela tells him, and they all laugh.

Then it’s all routine, after that. They enter the Drift and become one with Sentinel Brave. Ana reminds them to be careful.

“Yes, Mama Bear,” they chorus, and Sentinel Brave salutes as they do.

There’s a complication, out at sea. A fishing vessel. They try to save it. This is why they are both Rangers. To save people.

They succeed.

At a cost.

The Kaiju gains the upper hand in the fight. Jaeger and Kaiju grapple in the ocean, and the Kaiju rips Sentinel Brave’s left arm clean off.

Angela and Genji scream together. The A.I. speaks rapidly of loss of functions and losing balance and Angela’s left arm is burning, burning, *burning*.

A vile hand grips the conn-pod firmly, and a claw punctures through steel and glass. Metal shrieks as it is torn apart. More claws pierce through the conn-pod, tearing and ripping and *destroying*. The A.I. is speaking at them, warning of a dozen different dangers and –

Suddenly Genji’s gone from the Drift.

Gone.

The pain is unbearable.

She bears it, somehow.

Alone, Angela Ziegler pilots over a thousand tonnes of Jaeger.

There are only two thoughts in her mind.

Genji.

Survive.

She fires the plasmacaster of Sentinel Brave’s right arm directly into Knifehead’s monstrous face and it screeches as it dies.

Genji, she thinks.

Survive, she thinks.

One of the first things taught at the Jaeger Academy was *why* two or more pilots were required to operate a Jaeger. The neural load was simply too great for a single pilot to bear for any amount of

time. It was enough to kill. And it had killed, in the past: Adam Casey had been the first test pilot of a Jaeger, and the immense pressure had triggered a seizure that had killed him.

Ana Amari once piloted a Jaeger for twenty minutes on her own, while her partner Zareen lay crumpled on the floor of the conn-pod, killed by a Kaiju claw.

For that, Ana Amari became a legend. An irregularity. It was impossible, according to scientists and doctors. They did not know how she had managed it, how she had survived.

She should have died, they said.

Yet she bore the immense neural load, and she lived.

The pain is unbearable.

Angela bears it, somehow.

One step after another.

Rhythm.

That's all it is.

Left, right. Breathe in, breathe out.

[illegible]

They reach the coastline.

Sentinel Brave falls to its knees and remaining hand. Then, slowly, it topples onto its side and is still.

Genji isn't dead.

She drags him out of Sentinel Brave and into the snow. Her head is pounding. Her left arm is burning with pain. Her vision is blurry and her eyes won't focus.

“Don’t die,” she snarls. Her own voice sounds distant behind the ringing of her ears. There’s blood in her mouth, hot and metallic. The plates of her Drivesuit have been torn away from her left arm and there are angular gashes in the muscles beneath. She ignores that. “You don’t get to die. Not here. Not like this.”

“Your arm,” he says weakly. “It’s...bleeding.”

His legs are crooked. His left arm is a mangled mess. His breathing is laboured. She feels his pain. There's so much *pain*.

“Please don’t die,” she begs him. Their hearts are hammering in their chests. “Genji, *please*. I need you.”

Genji squeezes her hand weakly and says, “I’m trying not to.”

He doesn’t die, that day.

Neither of them do.

They don’t die completely, but parts of them do.

She’s awake when they arrive at the hospital, where a vast team of doctors and nurses are waiting with stretchers and necessary supplies.

Genji’s whisked away and the doctors are shouting and an operating theatre has already been prepared for him. Angela’s vision blurs and she thinks her head might explode; blood dribbles from her nostrils and her lips and she sees Ana’s face, drawn and worried, lips shaping words she cannot hear. *Ana*. Ana is here.

Somehow, she knows what Ana is saying.

Hold on, Angela. Just hold on.

A pilot named Olympia Shaw once piloted on her own for ten minutes. She was retrieved from her Jaeger, and taken immediately to a medical facility. On the trip there, she was awake and responsive.

As soon as they wheeled her stretcher through the hospital doors she experienced a brain haemorrhage and they could not save her and she died, just like that, in the hallway of a hospital.

Angela does not experience any seizures, nor does her brain haemorrhage.

Angela holds on.

Angela *lives*.

“You were placed under enormous amounts of neural stress by piloting Sentinel Brave alone for fifteen minutes.” The doctor’s voice is low and gentle. “I’ve recommended that you be taken off active duty for three months. After three months, you will have to sit a psychiatric evaluation and a physical examination before being approved for duty.”

She sits, and listens, and blinks her understanding.

Her head aches.

Her ears ring.

She tastes blood in her mouth.

The doctors can't place them in the same room because Genji's condition isn't stable. He's whisked back into surgery.

Her stomach twists. She understands.

She understands, but that's her partner.

That's *Genji*.

.

She's moved back to the Shatterdome and placed in the medical wing of the facility.

It's familiar. It's home. Ana and Gabriel are waiting for her there.

The pain relievers they are feeding into her system are strong, and she dozes off into that strange, grey space between sleep and being awake, and she's barely conscious of doctors moving around her bed and checking her vitals, pulling her eyelids open to shine lights into her eyes and test the responsiveness of her pupils.

She is conscious, though, of Gabriel holding her left hand, and Ana holding her right, the two of them murmuring quietly.

She falls asleep, at last, to the sound of their voices and the steady *beep-beep-beep-beep-beep* of her heartbeat.

.

Knifehead crushes Genji and she wakes up screaming.

.

Jack Morrison calls.

She hasn't seen him for a few months, now.

"Are you alright?"

She means to say, "Yes."

Instead she tells him, "No," and with that word – that single word – she nearly breaks.

Angela holds on, somehow. She keeps her composure and doesn't let it slip.

"That's alright," Jack assures her. *"You're allowed to admit that. Even if it's only to me. Alright?"*

"Alright."

They talk for a long time. Until 1am. Angela falls asleep while he's still talking. She falls asleep to the reassuring sound of his voice. She falls asleep and she's so weary and tired that she doesn't see the Kaiju or any headstones.

.

She remembers being young and seeing the Morrison twins being interviewed on television. The pilots of Romeo Blue, farm boys from Indiana, with their messy blonde hair and sparkling blue

eyes.

Jack and John.

.

John got cancer.

Too much exposure to radiation.

He couldn't beat it.

.

Jack stopped piloting, after that.

.

She closes her eyes and sees Kaiju: Yellowspine, Razormaw, Yamarashi, Clawhook, Teneyes, Hammertail, Longfang.

Knifehead.

She sees Genji dead in the snow.

.

Genji has a long road to recovery ahead of him.

He probably won't ever fight again.

.

Genji is transferred back to the Shatterdome and she spends nearly every waking moment at his bedside and wishes there was something she could do, *anything*.

She wonders what she could have done to prevent this.

.

"You saved his life," Hanzo tells Angela outside of Genji's room in the medical ward. His face is drawn, and there are dark shadows beneath his eyes, but Genji is stable and for that, he is relieved. "If there is anything – *anything* that you ever need – then do not hesitate to ask. I owe you the greatest of debts."

"I'm so sorry," Angela says, roughly. "I never meant for this to happen."

He's lost both his legs and his left arm. He's lost so much. He's –

"He's alive," Hanzo replies, his voice cracking. "He is all I have left, and he is alive. I cannot thank you enough."

.

"I feel strange," Genji tells her one day, just as he's waking up. "I feel – how do you say it – oh, legless?"

The startled laughter bursts from her lips and fills the room.

“There you are,” Genji murmurs, and smiles. “How’s your head?”

“I can still taste the blood,” Angela says softly. “I can still feel the pressure in my head. The ache....”

Ana squeezes her shoulder, and says, low and quiet and fierce, “It fades, eventually.”

Eventually.

Angela nods. Tries to smile.

Ana understands. Ana hugs her, in the way that Rangers hug each other: firm, reassuring, clapping her on the back to ground her. She holds her tight and whispers quietly.

“It’s alright, now,” Ana murmurs into her hair. “It’s alright. We’re here. Listen to my breathing. We’re here. We’re here, Angela.”

Gabriel understands. He tells her to shout at the sky and to run till she’s breathless. He spars with her in the Kwoon Combat Room till she can barely stand, and then he hugs her, and tells her it gets better.

Ana wasn’t his first partner, and he wasn’t her first partner. They’ve both lost co-pilots.

Angela hasn’t lost Genji.

But they’ll never pilot together again.

She remembers the first time they sparred together and the first time they Drifted together and the first time they piloted a Jaeger together at the Jaeger Academy and the giddy grins they shared after and the first time they piloted Sentinel Brave and first tattoos they got together and the first Kaiju they killed and –

She runs.

Not *away* from things. She runs for solitude and calm.

She runs, because in the act of running, there’s a steady rhythm to be found. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler runs alone.

Her arm hurts and she pulls her stitches but she runs.

.

Sentinel Brave won't be fit to be piloted for a long time.

The thought of piloting with someone else makes her feel sick. The thought of piloting another Jaeger makes her stomach clench. Sentinel Brave is theirs. It's been theirs for five years. It's –

Her head aches.

She tastes blood.

.

An eighth tally mark.

The doctors aren't really happy about the tattoo but Genji makes them relent with a bright grin and by telling them that it's *tradition*.

.

Angela traces her fingers over the tally marks and the tattoo that says *Sentinel Brave* and the PPDC insignia that she got tattooed onto her right shoulder upon graduating.

Eight tally marks and her head aches and her ears are ringing and she tastes blood in her mouth and has to check that she still has four limbs.

.

"I need you to promise me something." Genji's hand is warm and firm around hers. "You do what is best for *you*. You need to look after yourself."

"Genji...."

"You are my partner. My co-pilot. My other half." His eyes are sad. "Look after yourself. Don't... don't feel you have to do anything." He squeezes her hand. "We have already done so much, Angela. We have saved so many people. We should look after ourselves."

.

He's been offered a place at a rehab clinic in Japan. He's a beloved son of that country, a hero, and there is a team of doctors ready and waiting for him. They speak of state of the art prosthetics and innovative treatments. Hanzo is cautiously excited, awaiting his brother's opinion. Genji's eyes light up, and his lips pull into an incredulous smile.

"Go," Angela tells him, when he seems hesitant. "I will come and visit."

"You should go to Switzerland, first," Genji says. "If you want to, of course."

Hanzo and Genji go.

She wishes them the best and watches them leave.

She smiles.

It's a sad smile.

.

Angela runs.

She sees Knifehead rip Genji out of the conn-pod and throw him down into the raging ocean.

She staggers to a stop and vomits, ears ringing, head aching.

And then she straightens up and keeps running.

Snow settles on her shoulders. The wind is icy cold but she doesn't notice.

.

She cannot forget the sensation of Sentinel Brave's left arm being torn away. She cannot forget how the plates of her Drivesuit had been ripped apart.

There are angular scars on her left arm. Sharp. Regular. Matching the shape of the plates of her Drivesuit armour. She looks at the scars every morning in the mirror and traces her fingers over the ridged scar tissue. They are bright pink, now, but soon they will fade to silver.

They will fade, but they will always remain.

.

She Ghost Drifts with Genji and feels the phantom pain of the three limbs that have been amputated.

He Ghost Drifts with her and feels the unbearable crushing weight of piloting a Jaeger alone.

.

She dreams that Knifehead kills her parents and her grandmother and Reinhardt falls into the ocean and Genji dies in the snow and Mirembe's name is carved into a headstone and –

She wakes.

Angela gets out of bed, gets dressed, and she runs.

.

The sound of her footsteps alone is so *wrong*.

She feels empty without Genji walking by her left side.

.

She tosses a tennis ball across the bedroom and realises, before it lands, that Genji isn't sitting at the table reading a book.

The ball bounces on the floor. *Thud thud thud*.

Then there is only silence.

.

She sleeps irregularly. When sleep won't come, Angela paces through the corridors of the Shatterdome. She stands in Bay 3, the bay Sentinel Brave used to call home. Bay 3 is too empty without the Jaeger's looming presence.

She misses their Jaeger. She thinks about all the good that Genji and she did in that Jaeger.

Her left arm twinges.

Angela turns around and walks away.

There's a woman.

She's an engineer. Her hands are calloused and rough. She's Canadian, and served three tours of duty abroad before retiring from the military and joining the PPDC. She's two years older than Angela.

They fuck.

That's all it is. No strings attached. No commitments.

It ends as quickly as it began. Angela's glad for that.

3:49am and her feet beat out a steady rhythm against the concrete surface of the Shatterdome's indoor sports court.

She speaks to Reinhardt on the phone a lot. She talks to Mirembe a little less. Jack rings her almost daily.

She speaks to Genji, who is now at the rehab clinic and having the first measurements for his prosthetics taken.

"They say I'll be able to dance," he tells her cheerfully, and he's so upbeat that it makes her heart ache.

She's so glad for him.

Genji accepts that he will never pilot again. He feels pain, and sorrow, and grief, and anger, but he accepts this and then concentrates on what awaits him in the future. He will not be a Ranger again.

Angela is uncertain about so many things.

She doesn't know what her future holds.

They still share dreams, sometimes, even though they're so far apart. Knifehead screeches and roars and Angela says, "It's okay, Genji. It's okay." Knifehead rips her arm off and she says, "It's okay." Knifehead wrenches her from the conn-pod and she says, "It's okay."

"It's okay," she tells him, and ocean water and blood and bile fill her mouth.

She and Genji always talk after the dreams, after the Ghost Drifting. “I have to say,” Genji murmurs, “I’m getting tired of watching Knifehead kill either one of us.”

She laughs. It’s a low and sad sound. “I agree with you there,” Angela tells him. His left thigh is aching, muscles all tense and knotted. She tells him to get the physiotherapist to massage it out.

“I will,” her partner says, and Angela feels him smile. She senses his sadness and the way he misses her.

She misses him too.

.

4:12am and it’s her alone in the gym, throwing fast punches and kicks into a beaten and worn old punching bag until her hardened knuckles are red and purple and bruised and bleeding.

Ana comes into the gym with a bucket of water and ice, gently draws her away from the punching bag, and holds Angela’s hands as she guides them into the water.

She doesn’t call Angela foolish or reckless. She understands.

Ana understands.

.

She breaks down one night in the mess and Jesse draws her outside, away into a private corner and lets her howl into his shoulder.

He cries too.

.

She begins to get a bit better, by tiny fractions.

How, she doesn’t know.

.

Some days she just feels so *alone*, like she’s standing on an empty beach and an enormous wave of terror and loneliness and grief and anger is towering above, about to crash down at any moment and sweep her away, away, away, away.

.

But here’s the thing:

Angela is *strong*.

.

There’s a bright young graduate called Lena Oxton. Angela spars against her, but the Drift Compatibility isn’t strong between them.

Lena Oxton has quick darting steps. She bounces on her feet. Genji walks with assured strides, confident that his feet will land exactly where he puts them. They’re too different. Lena isn’t a match for Angela.

“Lacroix,” she suggests to Ana, after the sparring session. “Amelie Lacroix.”

“For you?”

“For Oxton.”

Amelie says she might consider the prospect of a new partner, one day. Angela thinks that perhaps Lena might suit. It’s an odd sense of intuition that Rangers possess that tells her this.

“Only if she’s ready,” Angela adds. “But if she is, then she will be a good match for Oxton, perhaps.”

Ana nods and notes it down. Then, to Angela, she says, “You did not have to try with Oxton, you know.”

“I know.” Oxton will be a good Jaeger pilot, if she can find a partner. “I’m sorry.”

Ana regards her with those piercing dark eyes and replies with, “So am I.”

.

She looks at another Jaeger and thinks, *I can’t do this.*

Not now.

.

Perhaps she might pilot again, one day, but not now.

Not for a while.

.

“Take all the time you need,” Amelie says over the phone. “You have been through a lot, Angela. Take some time. Learn to breathe again.”

.

This is not how it was supposed to go.

She should be out there saving *lives* and she can’t even think about piloting another Jaeger with another person without feeling sick and sorry and guilty.

.

Angela packs her bags, signs the necessary papers, takes the honourable discharge medal. The ceremony is short and grim. Ana Amari pins the medal to her jacket and says, “You’ll always have a home here. If you need *anything*, do not hesitate to ask.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Then Ana hugs her. Gabriel hugs her. They’re comrades, friends, mentors.

Family.

She changes out of her formal uniform and into casual clothes. Jeans, a shirt, a jacket. She shoulds her kit bag, and leaves the room that’s been hers for four and a half years. Jesse is

waiting outside, and they hug for a long time, and then she goes to find Ana and Gabriel.

Ana and Gabriel escort her out of the Shatterdome. They wait with her, silent and reassuring, each with a hand upon her shoulders.

.

Fareeha arrives at the Shatterdome just as Angela's car pulls up nearby. She abandons her belongings and runs over, confusion etched clearly upon her features.

"I didn't know you were coming today," Angela says in greeting. Her voice sounds flatter than it used to. Rougher.

Ana and Gabriel step away quietly. Fareeha doesn't notice. Her eyes move from Angela's face to the bag she carries. "I caught an earlier flight. Angela...you're not leaving, are you?"

Angela's arm still burns. She closes her eyes and sees Kaiju and Genji's dead body and the wreckage of Sentinel Brave in the snow. She feels the phantom pain of three limbs amputated.

There's a faint ache at the back of her head.

"Goodbye, Fareeha," she says softly. "Stay safe."

Angela puts her kit bag in the boot of the car, then gets in the front. She closes the door, and the car moves forward, heading towards the nearest airport.

Ana and Gabriel and Fareeha watch her go.

Fareeha's face is torn.

.

Angela never forgets the way Fareeha's face looks, that day. She never forgets the raw emotion on Fareeha's face and in her eyes.

She never forgets the way that Fareeha begins to reach out, before curling her fingers into a fist and slamming it into the side of her thigh.

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She considers going back to medical school.

She doesn't, in the end.

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She doesn't let herself run away.

She goes back to Switzerland, first. Visits Reinhardt and Mirembe. Visits the graves of her parents and her grandmother. She lays flowers before the weathered headstones and tells them about Genji, her wonderful co-pilot. She speaks of all the good things they accomplished together.

And then she leaves.

Angela goes to Japan, after that. Genji shows off his prosthetics and laughs. He's stopped dying his hair green, and now only the tips are that bright, unusual colour. Angela tells him he looks like an anime protagonist. Genji roars with laughter and runs his hand through her hair and cups the back of her neck gently.

"I missed you," he says.

"I missed you too." They press their brows together and close their eyes and just like that, they're breathing in time, their hearts beating as one.

"He's met someone," Hanzo tells her one night. They're washing the dishes in the kitchen, and Genji is in the gym doing his customary exercises. "One of the doctors, actually. They're not seeing each other, not yet, but they are dancing around each other like nervous teenagers." His lips twitch. "He thinks I don't know, but I do."

Angela smiles and laughs. "I suppose he has to hide it while he's attending the clinic as a patient. Who's the doctor?"

"Doctor Tekhartha. Zenyatta. Nice. Quiet. Calmest person I've ever met."

"Does Genji give him that sidelong surprised stare?" She demonstrates, and Hanzo snorts and nods.

"Yes. Just so."

They're speaking in Japanese. Sometimes, Angela's not sure if Japanese or Swiss German is her first tongue. Sometimes they jumble up together with English and she says, *good morning, how are you feeling?* in three languages.

"You should stay," Hanzo offers. He's smiling at her. Hanzo doesn't smile much. "You are family. It would mean a lot to Genji."

So she stays, for a little while.

Zenyatta has a firm and gentle handshake and a smile like the dawning sun: slow and radiant.

She thinks that he will be good for Genji, and hides her smiles behind cups of tea. Hanzo nudges her foot under the table and rolls his eyes, lips twitching.

Together, the two of them watch Genji and Zenyatta talk, and laugh, and smile.

And it feels good.

.

Her presence means a lot to Genji and she is glad to be at his side again, but one day he squeezes one of her hands with his and says, “I know how you think. I know what you feel. I know that you look out the window and that you just want to run. So run, Angela. Go. *Breathe.*” He is crying and so is she. “I will be alright. I *am* alright. You need to look after yourself.”

.

She leaves Japan, after a few months. She hugs Genji and Hanzo tightly and promises she will stay in contact.

Genji understands.

Angela goes.

.

She finds herself in Canada.

.

The Jaeger program is in its last days. The Anti-Kaiju wall begins construction.

Morrison and Amari and Reyes fight it every step of the way.

.

Satya Vaswani, chief of engineering at the Australian Shatterdome and undoubtedly the best engineer in the PPDC, publishes a stinging paper regarding the Anti-Kaiju Wall and how it will never work.

Construction continues and the politician Angela and Genji crossed paths with at that gala so long ago smiles at the cameras and speaks of a grand new step in the war against the Kaiju.

.

She feels Genji’s sadness, about that, and he feels hers. They talk on the phone, and reminisce about the good times, like the incident where they speared Clawhook through the eye with an entire tree.

They reminisce.

And they feel sorrow for what has happened to the Jaeger program.

.

She travels south into the United States.

.

Angela sometimes wonders if this travelling – this *running* – is her looking after herself, but she’s getting better.

She is not unaccustomed to grief and she runs, but not *away* from things.

She works through it, just like she always has.

.

There's no one to wake her from the nightmares and to slip into bed beside her and whisper, "Hey, it's alright. It's me. We're safe."

So she wakes up with a start, sits up, and takes deep breaths. She knows what is real and what is not, what is memory and what is in the present.

She grounds herself, reaching for the dog tags that hang from her neck and curling her fingers around the two pieces of metal. She breathes in and out. In and out. In and out.

.

She never takes her dog tags off.

Not even once.

.

PPDC RANGER R-27-0043| ZIEGLER, ANGELA C. | B POS

JAEGER – MARK-3 – SENTINEL BRAVE

She can remember what is written on Genji's dog tags perfectly.

PPDC RANGER R-27-0044 | SHIMADA, GENJI | A NEG

JAEGER – MARK-3 – SENTINEL BRAVE

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People recognise her, sometimes.

She doesn't stay in one place long because she doesn't really know how to.

.

Shatterdome close, one by one: Australia, Alaska, South America.

Jaegers are decommissioned. Pilots are thanked for their service and shoved in the direction of obscurity.

Soon only Hong Kong remains.

The active remnants of the Jaeger Program are sent there. A living museum, of sorts.

It's a sad thing to see. It's so *wrong* that her heart aches and she wants to cry and howl furiously.

.

Genji thinks it is *wrong wrong wrong* and she faintly feels his rage and bitterness and she feels sorry. Guilty.

He rings her and immediately says, "Don't you *dare* blame yourself for this. Don't you *dare*."

.

The first time Genji goes for a jog she drops everything and begins to jog with him.

They find a close rhythm. It's not perfect, but they're half the world away from each other and Genji's still getting used to his legs.

Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Genji Shimada run together, even though they are half the world apart, and they feel each other's joy. Her heart swells. She thinks that his might burst from all the emotion.

.

He'll never pilot again, but he can run, and he can dance, and they dance together sometimes. She moves around an empty room alone, and so does he, so many miles away. He raises his arms, lifting her unseen, and she leaps to match it. She extends an arm to spin him out and out he spins, grinning brightly and laughing.

They dance alone, and they dance together.

She asks Jack, once, if she should come back.

"Oh, Angela," he murmurs. "They try to cut our numbers down every week. I...thank you, though, for offering. It really does mean a lot."

"If you...if you need a pilot." She swallows and remembers the taste of blood and bile in her mouth. "If you need a pilot, Jack, then tell me."

"Alright," he says softly. "I will."

.

Genji won't ever pilot again but if Jack – and Ana and Gabriel and all the others – need Angela to, then she will.

.

There's a little town in the United States with a little gym that teaches self-defence classes on Monday and Tuesday nights.

She stares at the sign for a very long time before turning around and walking away.

.

She and Genji haven't Drifted together for a while now and their awareness of each other – the Ghost Drifting – gets weaker and weaker as the weeks go by.

.

She doesn't feel Genji brush past her mind and she is less and less attuned to his emotions and she feels –

— unbalanced.

It's strange how accustomed you become to Drifting with someone, how familiar you become with your partner.

And then it fades away and leaves an empty void in its wake and Angela feels unbalanced, unsettled, like a set of scales weighing down too heavily on one side, like a windblown leaf without a place to land, like the lonely eagle that can't find a current of warm air to bear it home.

She yearns for equilibrium.

She wonders, briefly, how badly it would have been if he had died.

But she experienced that when he just *disappeared* from the Drift, there one moment and gone the next, and she thought – for a flash of time, for all eternity – that he was dead.

Remembering *that* is bad enough and she lashes out, punches a mirror and shatters it, and then she stares at her bleeding left hand and all the shards of glass embedded in it.

There's an odd rhythm to be found, in stitching her own hand.

She thinks about medical school.

She dreams about cutting into a patient with a scalpel but it's Genji and he starts to flatline and the other surgeon looks at her with Knifehead's hideous face and laughs and laughs and *laughs* and she wakes up with a start, her heart hammering, skin drenched with sweat.

Alone in the motel room, she gets out of bed, gets dressed, and then goes for a run.

A storm sweeps through and Angela finds herself outside in an empty parking lot, staring up at a roiling grey sky and the lightning arcing through the clouds. The rain falls in waves – light, then heavy, and then in an absolute downpour – and purple lines criss-cross her vision in the wake of lightning in the sky. Thunder rumbles: she feels it in her bones, like the *roar* of a Mark-3 nuclear core whirling into life, like the ground shaking beneath a Jaeger's feet.

Strange, how in standing before all the ferocity of the storm, she feels closer to equilibrium than she has in a while.

I should be out there saving people, she thinks. I should be doing something.

She finds herself in communities that have been affected by the Kaiju and the destruction that they bring. She becomes a volunteer, helping to build classrooms one day, and teaching classes the next.

People call her Mercy.

Angela smiles a ghost of a smile and moves on.

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She moves from California to Mexico to Guatemala. Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Chile.

Sometimes people recognise her.

Mostly they don't. She isn't wearing a Drivesuit, or a formal uniform, or Ranger fatigues. She isn't standing before Sentinel Brave or next to Genji Shimada.

She's not really the Angela Ziegler that everyone knew.

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She maintains her fitness.

She doesn't ask herself why.

She can't.

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She moves on. Back up to the United States, Canada, Alaska. Back down to the United States.

The Anti-Kaiju Wall continues construction.

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She becomes a construction worker, of all things. She's strong and agile and has an excellent head for heights.

They send her to the top of the Wall and people don't really talk about the ex-Ranger who's welding and fastening bolts up in the heights. She's grateful for that.

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She patches up injuries on-site and it feels...

...well, it feels like she's being useful, at least.

"I'd pay you for it if I could," her supervisor tells her gruffly.

Angela shrugs. "It's alright. I just want to help."

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Angela Ziegler is twenty-nine and has been a student at medical school, a Taekwondo student and instructor, a Krav Maga student and instructor, a PPDC Ranger piloting a Jaeger, and a volunteer.

Now she is a construction worker.

She wonders what her parents would think.

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It's been twenty months since Knifehead ripped off Sentinel Brave's arm and then nearly killed Genji. Eighteen months since she was honourably discharged from the PPDC. Sixteen months since the Jaeger Program was announced to be in its last days.

Time goes on. She stays in contact with Reinhardt and Mirembe, with Genji and Hanzo. Genji is working part-time at a local community centre, now. He's enjoying it and that's a good thing, a fantastic thing. Angela is glad for him.

She hears from Jack, Ana and Gabriel, sometimes. They're kept busy by their duties.

Time goes on.

“Never took you for a construction worker.” It's been two years, almost. Twenty-three months. Gabriel's tracked her down. He's in his formal uniform and he hugs her fiercely. She hugs him back, and laughs tiredly into his shoulder, and wonders why he's here. All around them are construction workers goggling at the sight of the famed Ranger Reyes. “How have you been?”

“I'm a lot better than I was.” She steps away and notes the tension in his shoulders. The formal uniform.

Angela remembers telling Jack that if he needed a pilot, she would be that pilot.

She remembers him saying, “*Alright.*”

And she knows, then, that Gabriel is here because Jack has sent him.

“How bad is it?” she asks.

And so Gabriel tells her. A Kaiju broke through the Anti-Kaiju Wall in Japan. Tacit Ronin was deployed, and they killed the Kaiju, but not before the Kaiju killed them. It happened last night. A lot of people don't know, yet – various governments are trying to cover the incident as best they can, for fear of an outcry over the failure of the Anti-Kaiju Wall.

There's a plan. One last stand. And for that....

“We need you,” Gabriel tells her. His voice is rough and tinged with desperation. “It has to be *you*. It has to be Angela Ziegler. You were one of the best. Hell, you still are. Perhaps *the* best we can get.”

She clasps her hands behind her back and remembers the taste of blood and fear in her mouth. She remembers wondering if her head was going to explode.

“We'll get you another pilot. Morrison says he'll Drift with you if we can't find anyone else.”

“*Jack* said that? He hasn't piloted since....”

Since John.

Gabriel nods. “That's how much we need you now. I wish...I wish it wasn't so sudden and abrupt, Angela, I really do. But Jack said...he said you'd come back. And we *need* you.”

She remembers the Drift. Remembers piloting a Jaeger, killing Kaiju, saving lives.

She remembers the sensation of Sentinel Brave's left arm being wrenched from its body.

She remembers the emptiness, the void, that she was left in when Genji was torn from the Drift.

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“We need *you*,” Gabriel Reyes tells her.

Angela takes a deep breath in and nods.

“Of course,” she tells him. “Of course I’ll come back.”

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A few years ago, the thought of piloting another Jaeger with another person made her feel sick.

Now it’s something that Angela is fully prepared to do.

They need her, and she can help people again.

They need *her*.

And so she says yes.

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She packs her things. It doesn’t take long. She changes into the PPDC uniform with patches that declare *Ranger Ziegler* and *Sentinel Brave* and her years of service.

She flies back to Hong Kong with Gabriel and they talk. She doesn’t ask about the Jaeger she’s going to be piloting and he doesn’t mention it.

She rings Genji just before they land, and over the sound of helicopter rotors she hears the flat *beep-beep-beep* that means his phone is unavailable.

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III

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Fareeha Amari is standing in the rain, holding an umbrella, a faint smile upon her face. The sight of her takes Angela by surprise, until Angela notes the PPDC uniform that Fareeha is wearing. Then she shoulders her bag and jumps out of the helicopter and into the rain.

(Angela will remember this moment forever. She doesn’t know it *now*, but later she will think back to this moment and laugh in quiet amazement.)

“Ranger Ziegler,” Fareeha greets, and steps forward to shield Angela from the rain with her umbrella. “Welcome to Hong Kong.”

Fareeha's uniform bears patches to signify she has graduated from the Jaeger Academy, but no patches declaring that she is assigned to a Jaeger. Thus the title of Ranger is not really applicable. Fareeha *does* wear a PPDC engineering corps patch, though.

"Fareeha," she replies, and shakes Fareeha's hand. Her own is still splattered with oil and grease from working on the Wall. "When did you graduate from the Jaeger Academy?"

"A few months ago. I was in the last class of candidates before they closed it down."

"I see. Was your mother angry?"

They drop their hands back to their sides. Angela's hand feels oddly empty. She pushes that to the back of her mind and ignores it.

"Furious," Fareeha says, and smiles in that way she does – slightly lopsided, her lips pulling apart just enough to reveal a few teeth. It's a charming sort of smile. "It's good to see you, Angela."

"And you, Fareeha."

Fareeha has graduated from the Jaeger Academy. Fareeha does not wear any badge to declare that she is piloting a Jaeger. Angela wonders if that means she'll be a candidate to test for Drift Compatibility with Angela.

Then she pushes that thought away too. It doesn't matter who she pilots with, in the end, just as long as they're highly compatible.

Gabriel reaches out and squeezes Angela's arm gently. "They're waiting for you inside," he says, and leads them into the Shatterdome.

Ana and Jack are in the Marshal's office. Ana is pacing. Jack is still. He glances up when Gabriel opens the door, and says, almost hesitantly, "Is she—"

Angela steps into the room behind Gabriel and drops her bag of belongings on the floor. "I'm here," she tells them, feeling a little awkward at saying *that* for a greeting after so long, and then they're hugging her fiercely, together, clapping her on the back and squeezing her tightly.

It's an odd homecoming, but it *is* a homecoming, and her throat is thick from emotion and her eyes are suspiciously blurry.

Jack whispers into her ear, "Thank you. I know this is a lot to ask...but thank you, Angela."

"It's alright." She clears her throat. "It's alright, sir. I said I would come back if you needed me to, and I meant it."

"It's good to see you, Ziegler." Ana's voice is rough with emotion. "Very good. You look well." She claps Angela on the back again.

"Thank you, ma'am." Angela glances at Jack and wonders if she'll be piloting with him, or whether she'll find Drift Compatibility with another candidate. She wonders which Jaeger will be hers. There's so much she doesn't *know*.

"We've got a lot to talk about," Jack says, and there's barely any blonde in his hair now – it's almost all grey. "First, though...."

He trails off at the sound of footsteps coming up the hall, approaching the office.

Angela almost feels a ghost of a presence and –

No.

Not a ghost.

She feels *Genji's* presence, just faintly, and she hears him speak her name before it even falls from his lips.

She turns, and there he is, arms spread wide – one flesh and bone, the other metal and plastic.

They collide and laugh as one and they press their foreheads together. He's crying and she is too, just a little. She almost can't believe it. *How is this real? Am I dreaming?*

Genji pinches her arm and assures her that she isn't dreaming.

Angela laughs roughly. Then, incredulously, she asks, "What are you *doing* here?"

He moves back and holds her at arm's length. "I'm here to make it easier," says Genji, cupping her jaw with his prosthetic hand while his flesh-and-bone hand rests upon her shoulder. "I piloted with you for five years," he tells her, smiling fondly and lovingly. "If anyone can help you find a partner, Angela, then it is me."

That's a relief.

She's so glad that he's here.

He's here and even though he won't be piloting with her, it helps.

Genji is right.

If anyone can help her to find a partner, it's him.

Ana was the one that asked him to come back and help Angela.

"Of course I was going to come," he says, smiling that same old bright smile. "I was your partner for five years."

Winston still runs K-Science at the Hong Kong Shatterdome. He engulfs Angela in a warm hug and his voice cracks when he says how glad he is to have her back. He has a plan – and it's a hell of a plan – but she will hear more about it later. The other pilots do not even know that much.

Satya Vaswani is the chief engineer. She used to work at the Australian Shatterdome, and now she runs engineering at Hong Kong. She's the best in her field. Angela's known who Satya is since she attended the Jaeger Academy, but they have never met until now.

Angela shakes her hand and says, "It's an honour to meet you, Chief."

Satya regards her with shrewd eyes and says, “And it is an honour to meet you, Ranger Ziegler, and you, Mr. Shimada.” She pauses for a moment, and nods firmly. “Come with me. I have something to show you.”

Angela’s always going to remember those words.

Come with me. I have something to show you.

Sentinel Brave stands tall and imposing in Bay 4.

Sentinel Brave stands tall and whole.

Sentinel Brave stands before them and Angela and Genji stumble together, for a moment, before righting themselves, reaching out for each other instinctively.

“How....”

“*How?*” asks Angela, in a strangled tone, barely able to believe her own eyes.

Genji’s shaking his head. “I thought – when the Jaeger program began to close down, I thought they sent Sentinel to one of the Jaeger graveyards.”

“Sentinel Brave was put in storage,” Satya tells them. “We chose to repair it. Some improvements have been made, and a few modifications too, but that Jaeger is your Jaeger.” She says that firmly, and Angela could never doubt her, not when Satya Vaswani declares it so assuredly. “Right down to the very pattern of the paintwork.”

“*Mein Gott,*” Angela whispers, her fingers squeezing Genji’s shoulder. “Do you feel alright?”

Her left arm tingles with the memory of old pain for a moment.

Genji takes a deep breath before nodding. “Yes,” he says, and there’s awe in his voice. “I feel... amazed.” He looks at Satya Vaswani, and says, “Chief, we cannot thank you enough.”

“We mean it,” Angela adds. There’s a catch to her voice. “Thank you so much, Chief. To you and all the members of your team – thank you.”

She almost wants to cry. Sentinel Brave is standing before them. Before she and Genji. She gazes up at the immense Jaeger and breathes in deeply and wonders, for the second time that day, if she is dreaming.

Satya Vaswani nods. “We are just doing our job.” She’s smiling, though, and seems to be glad of their reaction. Relieved, too.

They stand in silence for a little while and take it all in.

Then Genji clears his throat. “Go on,” he encourages, and gives her a gentle push forward. “I need you to check every inch of that Jaeger, Ziegler.” He leans over to rap his knuckles against one knee, eliciting a dull *thunk*. “If one of my doctors saw me climbing around up there, they wouldn’t be happy.”

She hesitates, for a moment. Satya hands Genji a copy of the plans and they begin to discuss them.

Jack gives Angela a reassuring nod, and says, “Your Jaeger is waiting.”

She goes.

Angela climbs the catwalks and speaks to engineers and mechanics. She presses her hands to the metal reverently and whispers, “Look at you, beautiful.” She notices every exterior modification, every addition, everything that has remained the same. She climbs up to the torso, up alongside the arms and then to the shoulders, and then she makes her way onto a small platform before the conn-pod and stares at the head of Sentinel Brave. She stares in awe, and finds herself murmuring, “Hello, old friend.”

Satya and her engineers have done an incredible job, there is no doubt about that.

She glances down at the patches on her shoulders that declare *Sentinel Brave* and laughs quietly. All this worry about which Jaeger she will be piloting, and it just so happens that she will be piloting Sentinel Brave. *Her* Jaeger.

One of the engineers, a fellow called Torbjorn, salutes and says, “It’s good to have you back, Ranger. I hope she fits like a glove.”

“I’m sure she will,” Angela breathes. “I’m sure she will.”

She asks Torbjorn a series of questions, and he rattles off the answers cheerfully. They talk for a long time, and she keeps her palm pressed against a section of the Jaeger’s arm, till the cold metal is warm beneath her touch.

After Torbjorn has answered all her questions, Angela climbs back down to the bay floor, where Genji, Satya and Jack have been joined by Fareeha.

Fareeha shoots Angela a glance that is both nervous and curious. Everyone is waiting for her to say something, *anything*, to show some sort of emotion – she’s still quite stunned, honestly, and can hardly believe that this is real, that this is *happening*.

“Well?” asks Genji.

Angela wonders if it is even possible to find words that can convey all the emotions she feels.

She finds words, eventually, and says haltingly, “I almost cannot believe it...but Sentinel Brave is entire and perfect, and I cannot thank any of you enough.”

It turns out that Fareeha and Satya were both personally in charge of the Sentinel Brave restoration project.

Angela assures Fareeha of what a wonderful job she has done, and feels her stomach do a funny little kick when Fareeha smiles radiantly in return.

Fareeha speaks of the improvements – especially the new plasmacasters, which require far less time to power up and now have a far greater output. Angela listens attentively, and feels oddly charmed by the passionate way in which Fareeha talks about the Jaeger, and the approval she seeks from Angela.

She can remember exactly the way Fareeha's hand fit in her own – her palm broader than Angela's, the sensation of rough callouses against rough callouses, the warmth of Fareeha's skin.

She wonders, if she pressed her fingers to the pulse point in Fareeha's wrist, whether their hearts would beat in time.

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Their little group disperses, after that. Genji goes to ring Zenyatta and Hanzo. Fareeha and Satya have to examine some final designs before approving them. Jack has to fill out some paperwork.

Angela heads to the mess. A lot of people recognise her, and whisper, but no one approaches her. She gets her meal and sits at an empty table and suddenly feels weary, exhausted from all that's happened in the last twenty-four hours.

She's barely started her meal when Aleksandra Zaryanova sits down on the other side of the table and says, bluntly, "Think you're fit to pilot?"

There's silence. Everyone surrounding them has fallen into an uneasy sort of quiet. Angela looks up from her meal and calmly says, "Pardon?"

Aleks' eyes harden. "Do you think you are fit to pilot?"

Mei-ling Zhou, Aleks' wife and piloting partner, rushes over. "Aleks," she murmurs warningly, "don't. Don't cause a scene. Angela, I'm so sorry – Aleks, she only just *got* here, from America, they said—"

"You haven't piloted in two years," Aleks says abruptly. "If you're going to have our backs out there, then I need to know: do you think you are fit to pilot?"

Angela's stomach rumbles mournfully. She glances back down at her stew and thinks, *I don't want to argue.*

It has been a long day. She hasn't slept in forty hours. She hasn't eaten for seven. She doesn't want to fight because that's the last thing that this Shatterdome needs.

Still, there's a hard edge to her words that she can't mask. "I would not have come back if I believed myself to be unfit," Angela tells her. "Jack would not have sent Gabriel to ask me to return if they believed I was unfit. So, to answer your question – yes, I am fit to pilot."

Her words echo up to the high ceiling of the mess. Aleks considers her for a long time and then nods. She reaches out and offers a hand. "Aleksandra Zaryanova. I pilot Winter Brawler with my wife, Mei-ling Zhou."

Mei seems relieved. Angela releases a breath she didn't realise she had been holding and shakes Aleks' hand, then Mei's.

"Angela Ziegler," she introduces. "Pilot of Sentinel Brave."

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Saying those words – *pilot of Sentinel Brave* – feels odd. Bittersweet.

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She understands where Aleksandra Zaryanova is coming from: if their positions were reversed,

and Aleks was the returning Ranger who hadn't piloted in two years, then Angela would be worried about it. Worried about whether Aleks would be able to fight alongside she and Genji.

She would be worried about whether Aleks could find a partner to suit.

She eats dinner with Aleks and Mei and they tell her everything they know, which isn't a whole lot. Winston and Satya have been planning something with Jack. One of Winston's scientists has been making regular trips to a less-than-reputable district and came back with a bloodshot eye. There's a stockpile of nuclear material in one of the Shatterdome vaults. Apparently Winston has refused to say much until the arrival of someone who can pilot Sentinel Brave.

And that's Angela. All she needs to do is find a co-pilot, now.

Aleks and Mei haven't even thought of leaving. "This is our life," Mei says softly. "It's what we do." She gives Angela a warm smile and says, "We are glad you are back. Even if *some* of us," she shoots Aleks a look that is both frosty and fond, "have odd ways of showing it."

Aleks sighs. "I have never been, ah, a *people person*. I am sorry, Angela."

"It's alright," Angela reassures, and it is.

She understands.

A man wearing a cowboy hat walks into the mess with a familiar slightly bow-legged gait and Angela drops her knife with a clatter, standing up quickly, surprise flooding through her body.

Jesse McCree glances over, freezes, and then says in a strangled croak, "Tell me I ain't dreaming."

He isn't. She steps towards him and he lurches forward, sweeping off his hat and hugging her tightly.

Roughly, Jesse says, "I'm so damn glad to see you, Ange."

"I'm glad to see you too," she tells him, and hugs him just as tightly in return.

Angela tells him that she heard he left the PPDC when the Jaeger Program began the arduous process of closing down.

"I did. Bought some land back home, started fixin' up an old ranch house. Then I got a message from Jack. He said he needed a new Chief LOCCENT Officer in Hong Kong and wanted my opinion. I told him I wanted that job, and hopped on the first flight to Hong Kong." He laughs and shakes his head. "Funny thing was, I'd heard you were workin' on the Wall. I was about to come and see you."

Genji enters the mess hall a few minutes later, and he and Jesse make an absolute scene, laughing and shouting and crying and clinging to each other. Eventually they come to sit down,

Jesse says, "Why isn't your hair green anymore?"

“He’s settled down,” Angela replies, raising an eyebrow.

“*You*? Genji Shimada? The playboy himself?” Jesse stares at him incredulously. “Well, shit. He must be a great guy.”

Genji flushes and says, “Yes, he is.”

After dinner, she, Genji and Jack go somewhere quiet to talk.

“I hope,” Genji begins, “that you do not have any...hesitance in this, Angela. It is a big decision to make, and a hard one.”

“I accepted that I would never pilot with you again a long time ago,” she admits. “It was hard.” And it *had* been hard. Once, she had been sickened by the thought of piloting with someone else. Now, though, it is something she is fully prepared to do. “The only thing I am uncertain about is who I will be piloting with.”

“Well,” he says, and laughs a little, “*that* is why I am here. I know who you need.”

She cracks a weary smile. “Tell me who I need, then.”

“You don’t need my exact mirror image,” Genji says. “But you do need someone who’s confident. You need someone who is just as self-assured as you are.” She laughs a little. “You *are* self-assured,” he tells her firmly. “Especially when you are fighting. You know your abilities. You know that your foot will fall exactly where you place it. You need someone like that. A person who is your equal. Someone with a *spark*.”

Then Jack speaks. “I think there might be someone in the pool of candidates who you find a greater level of compatibility with,” he admits. “Greater than what you would find with me.”

Who? she wants to ask.

She wonders if she might already know the answer.

Jack shows Angela to her bedroom at long last. Weariness makes her limbs heavy and there’s a faint ache lurking at her temples. It’s been a hell of a day – or two days, counting time difference.

She and Genji will not be sharing a bedroom at this Shatterdome. That’s for the best, really: she must accustom herself to a new partner.

Yawning, Angela tugs off her shirt without thinking, and crosses her room in search of a towel. A faint gasp from outside makes her come to a halt and glance up.

Her door is open, and across the corridor, Fareeha Amari is standing in the doorway of her own room, eyes wide, cheeks flushed. There’s a long moment of silence where Fareeha gazes at Angela with wide eyes and Angela just stares back, wondering why Fareeha looks so surprised.

Then, very quickly, Fareeha shuts the door to her room and is hidden from sight.

Angela sighs and steps forward slowly to shut her own door.

She wonders what Fareeha saw to elicit *that* reaction. Perhaps it was the scars, or the tattoos – the tally marks for the Kaiju she’s killed.

Perhaps it was her relative state of undress.

Really, though – she’s wearing a sports bra, and her pants. What is so shocking about that?

She showers and falls into bed with hair that’s still damp. She sleeps deeply and peacefully, and for once, Kaiju do not haunt her dreams.

She wakes at 6am, dresses, and heads to the mess. Genji’s already there, with two trays of food – one for him, one for her – and while they are eating, he speaks of how the test in the Kwoon Combat Room should go.

“You are *sure* you are ready? You must be tired.”

And here’s the thing: she isn’t, really. She awoke feeling refreshed and energised.

“I’m ready,” she says, and she is.

There’s a small crowd in the Kwoon Combat Room. Two dozen candidates stand together, all straightening up and squaring their shoulders when Angela steps into the room with Genji. Jack and Gabriel are sitting off to the side on a long bench, and they gesture for Genji to join them. Jesse’s lounging against a wall, thumbs hooked through his belt, a lollipop between his teeth. He winks at Angela.

Standing before the sparring mats, Ana is holding a clipboard and murmuring something to Fareeha, who is at her mother’s side.

Upon seeing Angela, Ana says, “I will be supervising the testing today – with your permission, Ranger Ziegler.”

“Of course, Ranger Amari.” Ana isn’t a Marshal anymore, but part of Angela wants to call her *ma’am* and another part wants to call her *Mama Bear*, but this is a formal thing and thus formality must be used.

Genji squeezes her bicep and whispers, “Good luck. I will be watching.”

She gives him a grateful smile and nods. Genji goes to join Jack and Gabriel; Angela takes off her boots and warms up. When she’s finished, Fareeha hands her a staff and wishes her all the best.

Briefly, Angela wonders if she might be a candidate too. She hopes that Fareeha might be a candidate.

She tells herself that she doesn’t know why she hopes for *that*.

And so it begins.

Angela spars against Hana Song, who is *very* good despite her young age, yet Angela still wins

easily enough. She shakes her head at Ana, and thanks Hana for her time.

Lucio Correia dos Santos is good, too, but there's no compatibility between them either. She thanks him for his time too.

And so it continues.

Angela throws another candidate to the ground and is already shaking her head as she straightens up. No compatibility. *None*. This is the fifth candidate so far, and they haven't been getting better – Hana is certainly the best of them so far.

She breathes in and tries not to feel angry. There are nineteen candidates left. Then there is Jack. *I will find someone*, she tells herself. *I will find a co-pilot*.

Fareeha's quiet little judgements aren't exactly helping, either. Angela could have sworn that while she sparred the third candidate for all of ten seconds, Fareeha murmured to her mother, "Is she even trying?"

The anger grows. She finds herself looking across the room at Genji, who makes a gentle gesture which means *calm* and then smiles encouragingly. Angela breathes in again. She's still angry.

Ana calls out, "Next." Next to her, Fareeha makes an odd little sound – a sound of disapproval, of disappointment.

Frustration coursing through her body, Angela whips around and suddenly snaps, "Did you want to say something, Fareeha?"

Regarding her calmly with those steady dark eyes, Fareeha replies with, "Pardon, Ranger Ziegler?"

"You keep making these little noises." Angela makes a short, sharp, mocking sigh. "Like that. I can hear you whispering to Ranger Amari too. *Why?* If you have something to say it, then say it. Let me hear it." *What do you want?* she wants to bark out. *Why can't I stop thinking that it's going to be you?*

Her words are sharp and loud but Fareeha Amari does not flinch. If anything, she seems pleased to be challenged.

"You're holding back," says Fareeha, and waits.

And Angela *has* been holding back. None of them are good enough to match her, and she's been holding back. The first two candidates were decent. The three that followed were easy to beat. That's why she's so frustrated. So much is resting upon this – upon Angela. It should not be this *easy* to spar them all. It should not be so apparent within ten seconds of sparring someone that they aren't compatible.

Fareeha says it simply. Fareeha says it with a challenging gleam to her eyes. Fareeha says it, and smiles a crooked smile, and waits.

There's silence in the room. Gabriel and Jack are *smirking*, of all things, and Genji is nodding in a surprised yet pleased sort of way.

“Fine,” Angela replies sharply. “You come and spar me. That *is* what you want, no?” Surely it is.

Angela knows she wants it.

“Only if you start fighting like you mean it,” comes the reply.

Angela feels a faint surge of anger and a larger wave of amusement and she *likes* it, she likes the challenge and the spark in Fareeha’s eyes.

“Don’t you worry,” Angela tells her, “I will.”

Fareeha turns to her mother and asks a silent question with a tilt of her head.

“You are *sure* about this?” asks the older Amari.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” Fareeha says, calm and assured and challenging.

Angela thinks, *oh*.

Fareeha steps onto the mats and easily catches the staff that Angela tosses towards her. “Please don’t hold back, Ranger Ziegler,” she says, and spins the staff in one hand.

Angela is torn between scowling and laughing. She glances at Genji, who calls out in Japanese, “*Show her what you can really do, and she will show you in turn.*”

Alright, Angela thinks. *Alright*. She breathes in, grips her staff with both hands, raises it, and falls into a ready stance.

Several yards away, Fareeha waits, with an eyebrow raised and that lopsided smile still gracing her lips.

Angela lunges forward and brings the staff to a sudden stop, an inch from Fareeha’s brow. Fareeha hasn’t moved.

“One-zero,” Ana calls out.

“Show me what you can do,” Angela says simply, voice so low that only Fareeha can hear.

In a blur of motion, Fareeha knocks Angela’s staff away with her own, and darts in with a quick strike that stops an inch from Angela’s neck.

“One-one.”

A murmur spreads through the crowd. Angela bites back a smile. A fluttery feeling is rising in her chest – hope, tentative hope, yearning and wondering and *hoping*.

Taking two steps back, Fareeha falls into a ready stance and waits.

Let the dance begin, Angela finds herself thinking.

Here is something beautiful:

When two fighters of equal skill meet in combat and they dance the dance of battle.

.

Here is something poetic:

Staff meets staff and a rhythm is struck out. *Clack clack. Clack-clack-clack. Clack clack. Clack-clack-clack. Clack clack. Clack-clack-clack. Clack clack.*

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Here is something beautiful:

Angela Ziegler has met her match.

And so she does not hold back.

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Angela feels as though she has waken from a long slumber and she thinks, *she's the one*.

Fareeha Amari is like a bolt of clarity. Everything is vivid and clear.

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Fareeha is fast and strong and brilliant, absolutely *brilliant*. Her eyes are like an eagle's – sharp and shrewd and not missing a movement – and she moves like a wolf, like a leopard, all dangerous grace and raw power.

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Angela throws her three times. It's a little petty; Angela only does it to prove a point. *Surprise me*.

Fareeha sweeps her legs out from beneath her – literally and metaphorically, for she is *surprising* Angela, and has been since Angela arrived at the Shatterdome yesterday – and Angela slams onto the mats, stares up at Fareeha, and thinks, *there you are*.

They throw each other, but they do not throw each other off-balance.

They find balance together, rather.

.

Fareeha smirks when she fights.

Her eyes blaze and challenge and she is proud, proud and glorious, and she laughs and calls out a challenge – “Come on, Ziegler, I am hardly sweating yet.”

Angela just laughs back and flies at her with a flurry of attacks.

.

So finding Drift Compatibility isn't just about sparring someone and finding that they are your match, your equal. It's about establishing a connection. A rapport. A recognition. A relationship.

Angela sweeps out with her staff in a low arc and Fareeha jumps cleanly over the blow, raising her own staff and bringing it down in a blindingly fast strike. Angela dodges to the side, striking at

Fareeha's ribs, but Fareeha steps away and blocks.

So on and so forth. *Ad infinitum*, even – Angela wonders if they could spar like this forever.

.

Fareeha is the one that she can pilot with.

Angela knows this like she knows her own name.

.

It feels –

– *right*.

.

They spar till they are sweaty and breathing hard. Then, at long last, Ana tells them to stop.

The silence of the room is broken by thunderous applause. All the other candidates are clapping and whistling. Jesse's grinning broadly. Genji calls out in Swiss German, "*She's the one, Angela. You have found each other.*"

And they have.

Angela places her staff upon the ground, and then bows formally to Fareeha. "Thank you," she says. She will never be able to find the exact words to express the feeling swelling up in her chest, but here are some anyway – hope and joy and triumph, relief and a dash of regret, guilt. "Thank you, Fareeha," she says, and she means it with every fibre of her being: *thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you*.

Fareeha places her staff upon the mats, bows back, and replies with, "No – thank *you*, Ranger Ziegler." She's smiling that familiar lopsided smile, but there's something else on her face – something soft: a realisation. That's what it is.

Looking at someone and thinking *we can pilot a Jaeger* together is an indescribable sort of feeling. It's an incredible realisation, that's for certain.

Then they turn to face Ana and wait.

.

In another reality, Ana Amari looks at her daughter, and at the Ranger she knows so well, and says, "No. Absolutely not." In *that* reality she says no, because this is dangerous, being a Jaeger pilot, and she has never wanted this for Fareeha. In that reality, she thinks of Zareen: in that reality, she looks at their daughter and firmly tells her that she will never step into the conn-pod of a Jaeger and face down a Kaiju.

In this reality, Ana holds Angela's gaze for the longest time, and then says, after what seems to be an eternity, "Yes."

Angela does not miss the heavy way that single word falls from Ana's lips. *Thank you*, she thinks,

and at the same time, *I'm so very sorry, Ana.*

She remembers Gabriel telling them, all those years ago, before they even met Fareeha, "*Ana doesn't want Fareeha to join the Jaeger Academy.*"

"*Is Fareeha going to try?*" Genji had asked.

"Maybe," Gabriel had said. Then, later, with a grim face, he had told them, "*I don't want to watch my co-pilot's daughter get in a Jaeger. Not really. I watched her grow up, and if anything happened to her...Ana would be broken.*"

Angela's already nearly lost a co-pilot.

She will *not* let it happen again.

She feels like lightning is running through her veins in the place of blood and it's the same spark she sees in Fareeha's eyes. She thinks that she could run a thousand miles with Fareeha at her side, perhaps even more, perhaps into eternity itself.

Angela extends her right hand and Fareeha clasps it fiercely. Their hands fit together so well that Angela quietly marvels at it. She marvels at the existence Fareeha, her co-pilot, her partner. Fareeha, who is now one half of Sentinel Brave.

Fareeha seems a touch nervous when Genji approaches. She stands straighter, and glances at Angela for the briefest moment, before returning her gaze to Genji. It is as though she unsure of what his response is going to be.

Genji's eyes are dancing and glad, and he gives Fareeha a reassuring nod. "That was good," he tells them. "Marvellous. Brilliant. That was *pure* Drift Compatibility. You are a good pair: I have no doubt about that."

The tension leaves Fareeha's shoulders. "I'm glad you think so, sir."

"Call me Genji, please. Now – I hope you like to pilot on the left side," he warns Fareeha, "Angela won't let you have the right."

Fareeha gives a relieved sort of laugh and the two of them shake hands.

"That's fine by me," Fareeha assures.

They go to lunch.

Word has already spread. Mei bounces over to congratulate them, Aleks at her side. "We watched from the viewing gallery," Mei tells them. "It was *magnificent*. How are you feeling?"

"Relieved," Angela murmurs. "Very relieved. And impressed." She cannot help but to smile at Fareeha, with that – part of her still cannot believe that this has happened, that she has found a

partner.

And Fareeha, her partner, mirrors the expression.

Fareeha, her *partner*.

Angela catches glimpse of a television screen in the mess while eating lunch. It's on a twenty-four hour news broadcast, and across the top of the screen in large letters the following words are written: *PROTESTS IN TEN CITIES AFTER ANTI-KAIJU WALL FAILS*.

Mei pushes her tray away and murmurs, "I can't eat anymore."

Angela finishes her meal almost robotically.

Fareeha doesn't look at the screen again.

One of the engineers comes over and says that Satya needs to see her. Fareeha excuses herself quietly and leaves the mess.

Angela leaves to make some phone calls.

"I can't even gloat," Gabriel mutters, when Angela crosses paths with him in a hallway and asks if he's heard about the protests. "We *told* them. All this time, we told them – no fucking wall is going to stop a Kaiju. They never listened. Not even when Satya spelled it out for them." He curses in Spanish. "Advocates for the Wall are saying things like, 'no one died, so it's fine,' but we lost a *Jaeger* and two fine Rangers." He rubs his jaw, calloused hands rasping over stubble, and then says, "I wish I could tell you more, Angela, but I can't – not until Winston does."

She just nods and reaches out, clapping him on the back in the way that Rangers do: firm, reassuring, grounding.

She rings Reinhardt and he answers the phone almost immediately. The time difference is only six hours, so he's reading the paper and eating breakfast before heading off to work.

He asks how she is, and she blurts it all out: she's back with the PPDC in Hong Kong, and Sentinel Brave has been repaired, and Genji is here too – to help her find a new partner. She tells him that Fareeha Amari, Ana's daughter – yes, *that* Ana – is her partner.

"The way some politicians and figureheads say it," Reinhardt says, clearing his throat, "the Jaeger program is almost already buried. Why did you return?"

"To help," she tells him.

Angela wishes she could tell him more, but there's still so much she doesn't know.

"It's in your nature to help," Reinhardt murmurs. "Just...take care of yourself, alright? And this Fareeha. Take care of her too."

"I will." A beat. "You'd like her, I think. She's – she's confident and strong, and she...surprises me a lot."

Reinhardt laughs at that. “It takes a lot to surprise *you*,” he chuckles. “She must be one hell of a woman, hmm?”

Angela doesn’t know this, but Genji takes Fareeha aside that day, and tells her a handful of things she should know. “Angela will work herself into exhaustion,” he says, apparently. “Angela drinks too much coffee, so if you have the opportunity, drink some from her cup. She has an unusually high level of pain tolerance – you’ve seen an example of that – so if you need to, just pick her up and carry her to the med-bay. If any politicians come here for any reason, and they start to talk about how the Jaeger program is terrible, and so on, then you should also probably pick her up and drag her away. She starts frothing at the mouth.”

Apparently Fareeha laughs quietly, then asks if he has any other advice.

Genji taps his temple and says, “You will work it out. The two of you will. Not much is going to be private between you, not now. Are you ready for that?”

“I am,” Fareeha tells him, in her calm and assured way. “Honestly, I was ready the moment she stepped off that helicopter.”

At about 2pm Angela rescues Fareeha from a team of engineers arguing over a missing set of tools. Fareeha’s wearing steel-capped boots, which Angela grimaces at.

“Do you have running shoes?” she asks, gesturing to the boots.

“I – yes. Why?”

“Before we Drift together,” Angela says, “we need to run.”

And so they run. The Hong Kong Shatterdome has an indoor sports court, and they run laps around that.

Fairly soon they have fallen into a steady rhythm together. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Fareeha Amari run together, side by side, in something that is *not* perfect synchronisation, not quite, not yet – but it’s still impressive enough.

The new Drivesuits are black and sleek. Angela’s fits like a glove. There’s a moment when she glances over at her left shoulder and sees only torn muscle, but that image disappears after she blinks.

She must be frowning, for Fareeha quietly asks, “Are you alright?”

“Just a memory.” That reminds her of something. “Have you ever chased any R.A.B.I.T.s?”

Fareeha nods. “Once, at the Jaeger Academy. It was mine, not my Drifting partner’s. Why?”

“Mine – if any appear – will be...vivid.” Horrifying. “If there *are* some, then no doubt they will be of the Kaiju.”

Fareeha nods again. “If...there’s anything from me, then it could be from my deployments.”

“Alright.” Angela reaches out and lays a hand on the left pauldron of Fareeha’s Drivesuit. “I’m here for you. Remember that.”

Fareeha raises her left hand and grips Angela’s bicep. Scars old and new crisscross the skin of her fingers: she’s been a soldier, and she’s an engineer, and the scars speak of that. Some are from burns, others from cuts, and one – jagged and bumpy – is from shrapnel.

“I’m here for you too,” Fareeha reassures, and Angela swears that she feels the heat of her hand through the polycarbonate plates of the Drivesuit.

Together, they enter the Drift.

Both of their brains offer R.A.B.I.T.s simultaneously. The world shifts and changes around them.

Suddenly Knifehead threatens a hundred metres away. Sentinel Brave takes a staggering step, one-armed and battered from a lengthy fight, before it crashes to the ground and is still. Genji screams. There are graves with the Ziegler name carved into their headstones and dead flowers laying on green grass. A lone young woman runs by, her right arm dripping blood. Yellowspine screeches. Other Kaiju lurk on the horizon, growing closer and closer with every passing breath.

“Don’t chase the R.A.B.I.T.,” Angela says softly. She can hear gunfire, soldiers screaming, explosives detonating. She turns and sees a shifting image of Fareeha shouting at her squad, shouting for help, muttering a prayer under her breath as she vaults over a barricade – and is then thrown back by the force of an immense explosion. Then, when the dust clears, there’s a woman, broad-shouldered and smiling lovingly, holding a young Fareeha in her arms.

Zareen Khan.

Angela tears her eyes away, somehow, and focuses upon her partner. Fareeha’s watching on in horror as Angela carries Genji out of the wreckage of Sentinel Brave’s conn-pod, the two of them bloody and shattered.

“I’m here for you,” Angela says, and Zareen laughs in the background and lifts Fareeha into the air. Ana’s voice, faint and distant and *loving*, reaches Angela’s ears. *There are my two girls. Dinner is ready. Come on.*

Fareeha takes a deep breath, steels herself, and nods.

Together, they move on.

They Drift.

Their bond is strong. No other R.A.B.I.T.s threaten.

They Drift, and they Drift *well*.

.

It's a testament to how compatible they are.

.

After they've left the Drift and disengaged from the equipment, Angela glances over and Fareeha's staring at her, eyes wide and amazed, teeth bright and gleaming.

Suddenly they're together, and Fareeha's laughing into her hair, and Angela's arms are around Fareeha's neck. The Drivesuits make embracing awkward, and the hardened plates *thud* against each other dully, yet the two of them hardly notice. They embrace, and it feels *right*.

Fareeha whispers, "That was...exhilarating. I've never felt that with anyone else before."

Angela draws back so that she can look into Fareeha's eyes, and she says, "*That* is how compatible we are."

.

When you can Drift with someone – and Drift *well* – it feels like you can achieve anything. Like you can run a thousand miles without stopping, like you can race the wind itself, like you can walk into the fiercest battle and fight your way through it and come out unscathed.

.

It's like...

...oh, it's like you can reach out and grasp the stars themselves.

.

Jack and Jesse, who had been supervising the first attempt at Drifting, seem quite impressed.

"Well done," Jack congratulates. "Tomorrow, you can take Sentinel Brave out for a test run."

.

Two years ago, the thought of piloting with another person made Angela feel sick.

Now she's looking forward to it.

.

There's a dash of guilt, in that.

Perhaps there always will be.

What she knows, though, is this: Genji and Fareeha are not identical. Fareeha is not a substitute for Genji, or a replacement.

Fareeha is an individual. She shares many common qualities with Angela – and Genji – that allow for such a strong rapport, such a high degree of Drift Compatibility. She is strong and assured, she is *challenging*, she is brave. Fareeha knows who she is. When she steps out, she knows exactly where her feet will fall.

Fareeha Amari Drifts with Angela Ziegler, and Angela feels...

...equilibrium.

.

They have their differences, but all Rangers do.

What's more important is the relationship. The compatibility. The harmony.

The equilibrium.

.

They go to the sports court and they run.

They run to learn about each other.

They run, because in the act of running, there's a steady rhythm to be found. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Fareeha Amari run together, side by side, in near-perfect synchronisation.

.

Zareen Khan was Ana Amari's childhood friend. They grew up together, entered the military together, trained to be snipers together. Zareen was Ana's spotter. They became legendary in the military world.

Fareeha was Ana's daughter by blood, and Zareen's daughter by sheer force of love.

When the Jaeger program began, they were asked to train to become Jaeger pilots.

Fareeha was young, but old enough to understand why Ana and Zareen said yes.

.

Zareen died, crushed to death by a Kaiju claw, and Ana piloted alone for twenty minutes.

Fareeha mourned the loss of one of the two women who had raised her.

.

Here's the thing:

Fareeha doesn't just want to prove herself.

She wants to avenge Zareen.

This is about family.

This is about exacting vengeance on the Kaiju.

.

Angela comes to a sudden stop and Fareeha does too, two paces later.

“Is something the matter?” she asks, eyebrows drawing together, face puzzled. She steps over to Angela, head tilted slightly to the side, eyes curious. “Did you pull a muscle?”

“Dance with me,” Angela says, breathless and smiling.

Fareeha blinks in surprise. “I don’t dance very well,” she replies. Sweat beads at her temple and runs down past her jaw, down the length of her muscled neck. “I...don’t ever really dance at all.”

Now that is a *pity*. Fareeha possesses a natural sort of grace – a *lethal* sort of grace – that would make her an excellent dancer.

“That does not matter,” Angela tells her. “*This* does. Dance with me.” A beat. “Trust me.”

Fareeha brushes an errant strand of hair behind one ear and then says, “Alright. Let’s dance.” Then her lips twist into a teasing smile. “Don’t we need music, though?”

“No, we don’t.” Why would they need music when their hearts beat out a steady rhythm? “Come here. Place your hand on my shoulder – yes – and hold this hand.”

And so they dance. Fareeha is a little unsure, initially, but then she relaxes and lets her feet fall where they should. She relaxes, and lets herself move with Angela. It’s not all that different from running.

Angela leads, at first. Then Fareeha takes her by surprise when she lowers one hand to Angela’s waist and leads her into a turn. Angela lets her take control, saying nothing, just smiling wryly in a way that makes Fareeha laugh quietly.

They move together, as one, dancing to a rhythm that only they can feel.

Here is something poetic:

They are not a matched pair, on the surface.

It goes beyond Angela being the veteran Ranger and Fareeha being the soldier who has only graduated the Jaeger Academy recently.

Fareeha proudly bears an Udjat beneath her right eye: this is who she is – protector, warrior, guardian. She has seen war. She fights for what she believes in. She is an *Amari*, from a long line of decorated soldiers. Fareeha walks with a steely purpose. Fareeha looked at Sentinel Brave and thought, *I will fix this. This Jaeger will be piloted again. Fareeha challenges.*

Angela is the veteran Ranger with scars all down her left arm and eyes that speak of killing Kaiju and piloting a Jaeger alone for fifteen minutes. Angela is one of the two legendary Rangers who have piloted a Jaeger alone for an extended period of time and survived. Angela carries a quiet, unspoken presence that makes heads turn unbidden to follow her as she walks by. Angela wants to *help*: that’s all she’s ever wanted.

Fareeha is quiet and serious till she cracks sly jokes and makes odd faces at her mother’s back.

Angela smiles wryly and listens attentively and laughs into her hand while Fareeha smiles that crooked smile.

But they are absolutely brilliant together.

Here is something poetic:

They walk like wolves, all lithe grace and danger. They stride through the Shatterdome hallways together. They run in perfect synchronisation. They spar, and it is beautiful to behold. They play chess, and soccer, and they dance without words, following no set pattern of steps. They listen to the reports, standing side by side, arms folded, shoulders square, jaws firm.

Here are two halves of a whole that can pilot a Jaeger in synchronisation. Here, beneath their vastly different surfaces, are two people who understand each other. They are not mirror images, and they do not need to be.

Rather, they understand each other.

Rather, they synchronise.

Here is something poetic:

Harmony.

Equilibrium.

Drift Compatibility.

Equilibrium.

Angela had wondered if she would ever find it again.

And she has. She has found it.

With Fareeha.

They take Sentinel Brave out for a test run and it feels like a homecoming, like seeing an old friend after so many years apart.

Angela suddenly remembers the sensation of the Jaeger's left arm being torn away and Fareeha feels the pain, hissing, "*Ow*," under her breath before cursing in Arabic.

"Sorry," Angela apologises. "I should have warned you."

"It's not your fault," Fareeha replies, and her tone is gentle. "What would you have said, anyway?"

"I'm not sure. 'Ever felt your arm being torn off?' doesn't seem like the right thing to say."

Her partner laughs quietly. Her laughter is a rich sound, warm and pleasant to the ears.

Angela thinks she might treasure the sound of it forever.

Fareeha gets a tattoo that says *Sentinel Brave*.

It's tradition.

She gets the two words inked on the left side of her chest, just over her heart.

.

The meeting is held. Winston reveals his plan.

A direct assault upon the Breach.

It's been tried before, of course. The PPDC sent down missiles and bombs back when the PPDC was first formed. They just...bounced off, for lack of a better word.

This time, they're going to destroy it from within.

A Jaeger will enter the Breach, carrying an explosive device, and upon entering the Breach the explosive device will be detonated. Winston theorises that the energy from the explosion should be enough to destabilise the Breach – which itself draws energy from the Earth's tectonic plates – and thus the Breach will then be sealed off.

Ana and Gabriel already knew about the plan. Mei and Zarya didn't.

The pilots of Winter Brawler look at the pilots of Sentinel Brave and the four of them watch grim realisation dawn across each other's faces.

.

Winston thinks that there will be a double event, according to his calculations. Two Kaiju will leave the Breach at the same time.

Soon, he says. Very soon.

.

After the meeting, she corners Gabriel and Ana in the gym and snaps, "What on *earth* are you both thinking?"

Ana sighs. "Angela-"

"Tell me – *tell me* – that Shadow Spectre isn't going to be the Jaeger carrying that bomb."

There's silence.

Gabriel shakes his head. "We can't do that, Angela. We won't lie. Not to you."

She feels sick. "There has to be a way to save everyone. Autopilot – something, *anything*."

"It has to be us," Ana says, and Angela sees just how much grey is in her hair now, and the fine lines of age gracing her face. "It's for the greater good."

"You both have given so much already. You both deserve *better*." They have lost so much, the two of them. *This isn't fair*.

"We all do, Ange," Gabriel says, and reaches out to grip her shoulder. "It's a small sacrifice to make, though. Two people, to seal the Breach shut? How many lives will we save?"

Thousands. Millions, perhaps.

“And there is no way in hell we are letting anyone else do this,” Ana tells her. “It will be us.” She glances over Angela’s shoulder and smiles sadly.

Fareeha is standing in the doorway, as still as a statue.

She’s angry.

There’s also a resigned sort of acceptance and understanding in her eyes.

There has to be a way, Angela thinks furiously. There has to be a way to save them. A way to save everyone.

They run.

Not *away* from things. They run for solitude and calm.

They run, because in the act of running, there’s a steady rhythm to be found. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Fareeha Amari run together, side by side, in perfect synchronisation.

One of Winston’s scientists Drifts with a Kaiju brain that he bought on the black market, and a great many disturbing things are bought to life. The Kaiju are cloned. They are controlled by a race of beings called *Precursors*. The Kaiju are being sent to colonise Earth.

“Colonise,” Aleks says flatly. “They came to destroy – those monsters – and they are clones. *Clones*.” She folds her massive arms and scowls. “What terrible science-fiction novel is this?”

It’s disturbing.

They’ve fought the Kaiju for so long, and only now do they learn about the motivations of those monstrous creatures.

“I almost don’t want to believe it,” Fareeha murmurs that night. The two of them are standing in the hallway between their quarters. No one else is around.

Angela places a hand upon her shoulder and says, “I know. We always wondered...but this is just...hard to believe.”

They fall into an easy sort of silence, just standing there, the two of them: Angela’s hand on Fareeha’s shoulder, Fareeha’s head bowed.

“Get some sleep,” Angela says eventually. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Alright.” Fareeha glances to the side, raising a hand to cover a tremendous yawn. “Sleep well, Angela.”

“You too, Fareeha.”

.
She dreams that Knifehead wrenches Sentinel Brave’s left arm from its body.

She dreams that Knifehead tears the conn-pod open and then throws Fareeha down into a raging ocean and Angela wakes with a start, drenched in sweat, heart hammering in her chest.

.
She finds herself outside the Shatterdome, staring out across the bay to where all the lights of the city gleam and shine.

Gabriel comes to join her after ten minutes or so. He reaches over and draws the hood of her jumper up over her head, before leaning against the metal railing Angela has braced her arms against.

“Can’t sleep?” she asks.

Gabriel laughs humourlessly. “Not a bit. Keep seeing Kaiju. You?”

“Same.”

“Fucking Kaiju,” he mutters, and she leans against him. He places an arm around her shoulders. “We’re going to beat them, Ange. We will.”

“I’m not going to let you die,” she tells him. “Not you and Ana.”

Gabriel glances down at her, a rare softness in his eyes. “No one else is going to die in our place, Ange.”

What if, she wonders, no one dies at all? What if we all manage to live?

She feels a fool for thinking that, though.

A Ranger’s life is a hard life.

And what they’re going to attempt to do is near impossible.

.
They’ve endured enough hardships in their lives.

What if Gabriel and Ana got to live in a world without Kaiju? What if they could wake up each morning and think, *we closed the Breach*. What if they could go to sleep each evening without worrying about an impending Kaiju attack?

They deserve all that and so much more.

.
She goes back to bed and gets a little sleep, just a little.

At breakfast, Fareeha wordlessly hands Angela a cup of extra strong coffee and seems simultaneously impressed and disturbed when Angela drinks the stuff.

.

Winston's predictions are right: a double event occurs, and two Kaiju crawl out of the Breach and head towards Hong Kong.

Almost as though they're seeking out the Jaegers, not the other way around.

Almost like they're seeking out the young scientist who Drifted with a Kaiju brain.

.

Winter Brawler, Sentinel Brave and Shadow Spectre are deployed.

"*Let's kick some Kaiju ass!*" comes Mei's voice over the comms and Fareeha and Angela laugh as one.

.

"*Be careful,*" Ana warns, just after the Jaegers are dropped into the water.

Before she knows it, Angela finds herself saying, "Yes, Mama Bear."

There's silence for a moment, then, "*Fareeha, don't you dare—*"

"You be careful too, Mama Bear," Fareeha interrupts, smiling

Gabriel chuckles and Ana does too, after a short pause.

.

The battle begins and no one's laughing anymore.

.

One of the Kaiju unleashes an electrical pulse.

Winter Brawler, a Mark-4 – a *digital* Jaeger, not an *analogue* like the Mark-3s and earlier – is deactivated. The searchlights mounted onto the Jaeger switch off, one by one, and then all the running lights and glowing strips running up the Jaeger's arms and torso.

.

"*Well shit,*" Gabriel drawls. "*That's just fucking rude.*"

.

And the battle continues while Winter Brawler stands tall and unmoving like a statue forged of steel.

.

Sentinel Brave grapples with the Kaiju responsible for shutting down Winter Brawler, slams two heavy punches into the monster's head, and then rips out the glowing organ responsible for the electrical charges. The Kaiju screeches. Sentinel Brave lands a solid uppercut into the creature's

jaw and it staggers back, dangerously vulnerable.

Shadow Spectre takes advantage of the Kaiju's vulnerability, striding in and unleashing three blasts from its left plasmacaster into the Kaiju's heart. The plasma burns through flesh and bone, cauterizing blood vessels in its wake and preventing toxic Kaiju blood from escaping the body. The plasma burns into the monster's giant heart, scorching and searing deep into the muscle, leaving the most grievous of wounds in its wake.

The Kaiju screeches again, a feeble sort of sound, the sound of a dying creature. It shudders and crashes down into the water, gigantic limbs twitching in death.

Then the second Kaiju flares out two gigantic wings, surges out of the water and into the air, and grabs Shadow Spectre. The Jaeger raises its left plasmacaster and fires a blast of plasma; the Kaiju twists in the air to avoid the deadly substance, before lifting the Jaeger up.

Angela and Fareeha watch on in horror as the flying Kaiju lifts the Jaeger out of the water and soars up, vast wings beating powerfully as Shadow Spectre thrashes and lashes out. Then, savagely, the Kaiju hurls the Jaeger into the docks district. Nearly two thousand tonnes of steel crashes into concrete and it sounds like the earth itself is rending apart. Warehouse windows shatter from the ensuing shockwave. A crane groans, then topples over, landing atop the downed Jaeger.

Shadow Spectre does not rise. There's an awful moment when Angela thinks, with a sinking heart, that they are dead.

"Reyes and Amari are alright," comes Jesse's voice. *"You're on your own now, though."*

Then the winged Kaiju comes soaring back towards them. They fire off two shots from each plasmacaster, but the Kaiju avoids them all. It crashes into them with the force of a hurricane, curls its clawed feet into Sentinel Brave's shoulders, and lifts them up and into the sky, right up beyond the cloudbank. They see a perfect silver full moon and all the stars glittering, and they're *still* rising, up and up and up. Angela and Fareeha lash out, but the Kaiju shakes the Jaeger so fiercely that the conn-pod jerks violently.

"Do something!" Jack shouts over the communications channel. *"It's going to drop you!"*

There's nothing they can do. The plasmacaster clips haven't recharged enough to unleash a blast.

"You didn't happen to forget to tell me about a weapon, did you?" Angela shouts while the A.I. reports about altitude and lowered temperatures and losing oxygen. *"Come on, Fareeha, surprise me!"*

"Activate the chain sword!" Fareeha barks out, reaching over to the control board and pressing a finger against the weapon selection screen. *"Activate Raptora!"*

"Activating Raptora," drones the A.I.

Sentinel Brave swings its left arm out and down, around and up, and there – protruding from the back of its wrist – is a gigantic chain sword, all massive plates of gleaming steel linked into a deadly weapon.

Angela thinks incredulously, *you're marvellous. Do you know that, Fareeha? You are utterly marvellous.*

"With me!" shouts Fareeha. Together they lash out with the sword. *"For Zareen,"* Fareeha snarls, and together they cut into the Kaiju. Sentinel Brave is strong, wondrously strong, and the blade

cuts deep into flesh and crunches through bone. Blue blood sprays out, almost seeming to glow, startlingly vivid against the night sky and the moon.

Together, they cut the Kaiju in two.

It releases them.

A flash of triumph, and then –

And then they are falling, falling, *falling* through the sky, and the clouds are rushing up to meet them. The A.I. says they're at forty thousand feet, thirty thousand, then the stars disappear and they're falling through the thick clouds. Twenty five thousand feet. Through the clouds there is a glimmer of Hong Kong, then the white mire is enveloping them again. Jack is barking out orders – telling them to activate the propulsion system; that they're coming in too fast. Angela shouts, "*I know!*" and she reaches over to flick several switches to prepare the propulsion system.

Not like this, she thinks. *I'm not going to let you die.*

The A.I. notes, "Altitude: twenty thousand feet."

Fareeha snaps at the A.I. to shut-up in Arabic.

The A.I. ignores her and says, after a few seconds, "Altitude: ten thousand feet."

Then they're out of the clouds and Hong Kong stretches out beneath them: millions of glittering lights and thousands of glistening buildings. If they land in the wrong place, how many will die? Hundreds? Thousands? Tens of thousands? More?

Come on, Angela thinks desperately, *come on come on come on.*

Eight thousand feet.

Six thousand feet.

Four thousand feet.

Three thousand feet.

"*Now!*" Fareeha barks out, just as Angela's reaching over to activate the propulsion system.

The nuclear core *whines* and suddenly Sentinel Brave is falling *up* – no, that doesn't make sense, they're *soaring* up and back.

Then the Jaeger is falling again.

Their descent has been slowed, though, and they *might* just make this. *Might*. Below them is the unmistakable shape of a stadium and it looks *empty*, thankfully.

"We'll land there!" Angela shouts.

"It's going to be a rough landing!"

Angela finds herself laughing. "Isn't it? Brace for impact!"

And they land, nearly two thousand tonnes of steel and alloyed metal, in the centre of the stadium. Turf and earth erupts into the air. Glass shatters and plastic chairs burst apart before the mighty force of the shockwave. Every single light *explodes* and then it's dark outside, terribly dark and

terribly silent, save for the soft pitter-patter of earth raining down upon the Jaeger.

Fareeha gasps for breath. Angela feels like the air has been punched from her lungs. Still – *somehow* – she manages to find words. “We made it,” she says, and her voice is hoarse and faint and disbelieving. “We – we’re alive.”

The two Kaiju are dead and they’re *alive*.

“Oh my gosh.” Fareeha gasps, then sucks in a deep breath. “I – *fuck*.”

Angela laughs breathlessly. “That’s a good word for it. Fuck.”

“Fuck,” Fareeha agrees roughly. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. You?”

Fareeha’s just killed her first Kaiju in what is undoubtedly the most bizarre battle Angela has ever fought in a Jaeger. And Fareeha – brave, assured Fareeha – laughs shakily and says, “I’m good. How’s Sentinel, though?”

The A.I. reports that the Jaeger’s joints have endured a great deal of stress, though the Jaeger is still in operating condition. *That’s* a relief. Fareeha and Satya’s upgrades to the Jaeger are to thank for that.

Then Jack’s voice is flooding through the conn-pod. “*Report, Sentinel Brave. Report.*”

“We’re alive and well.” Angela looks at Fareeha and shakes her head slowly. She still can’t quite believe that they’ve done it. “We made it, sir. How are the others?”

“*They’re all fine.*” A beat. Fareeha makes a sound of relief. “*You’re the luckiest pair of Rangers I’ve ever seen, you know that? I can’t believe you made it.*” He clears his throat. “*When you get back to the Shatterdome, I’m pouring you both a drink.*”

“I’ll hold you to that, sir,” Fareeha says. “I think we could both use one.”

When they’ve got their breath back, Sentinel Brave straightens up slowly. Dirt cascades down from its arms and shoulders. The dust clears enough to reveal two helicopters circling above the stadium, one PPDC, one a helicopter for one of Hong Kong’s foremost news channels.

“Smile for the cameras,” Angela murmurs wryly, and together – she, Fareeha, and Sentinel Brave – salute.

When they get back to the Shatterdome, they’re met with a cheering crowd. Ana, one splinted arm in a sling, hugs Fareeha fiercely and waves away her concern. Genji embraces Angela and she laughs tiredly into his shoulder. Jack presses a tumbler of whiskey into Angela’s hand, and another into Fareeha’s, and congratulates them on a job well done. Gabriel kisses Angela on the crown of her head and claps Fareeha on the back. Jesse kisses them both on their cheeks and refills their tumblers of whiskey. Aleks and Mei are incredulous and laughing, absolutely amazed at the fact that Angela and Fareeha survived a fall from such a height. Everyone is congratulating them, and it’s almost overwhelming.

Fareeha’s presence at her side is reassuring, though. They remain close together, and share weary smiles between hugs and handshakes.

When all the noise and joy has died down, Angela manages to pull Satya into a quiet corner, where she then fervently thanks the chief engineer for her work on Sentinel Brave.

“Well,” Satya says, in a slow and thoughtful manner, “I could have hardly foreseen that Jaeger falling from fifty thousand feet – but I suppose we did a good job, given that you both survived.”

.

The doctors drag Fareeha and Angela into a nearby room and give them both check-ups. They are given a clean bill of health, and told to get some rest, if they can.

Outside, the crowd has begun to dissipate. A team of engineers and mechanics are already swarming over Sentinel Brave and cataloguing everything that is to be repaired. Shadow Spectre, dented and scratched all over, is half-visible through showers of angle grinder and welding sparks. Another team of mechanics are running diagnostics on Winter Brawler’s digital systems.

Life at the Shatterdome has already fallen back into the post-Kaiju routine.

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Ana’s arm has been broken in two places: radius and humerus. She won’t pilot for three months.

It’s a heavy blow.

.

Gabriel looks at Jack and says, “The Kwoon Combat Room is empty.”

Jack, who hasn’t piloted for so long, nods and smiles. “Think this will work, Reyes?”

“C’mon, Morrison. It’s either going to be great, or absolutely terrible. What have we got to lose?”

.

They spar.

Ana watches with shrewd eyes.

Fareeha sits next to Angela on one of the benches. They’re out of their Drivesuits, now, but have delayed traipsing off to shower in favour of watching this. They sit shoulder-to-shoulder, thighs pressed together, watching attentively.

If Ana notices that their hands are touching – that two of Fareeha’s fingers lay over two of Angela’s – then she does not say anything in regards to it.

.

Jack and Gabriel spar and it is like watching poetry slowly unfold: they are tentative, at first, till they learn the steps to this dance. Then they begin to strike out faster, staffs spinning and arcing through the air, wood clacking against wood. Gabriel scores a point, then Jack scores. A pattern emerges.

Jack and Gabriel spar and this is what Drift Compatibility looks like.

.

Later, Angela stands in the shower and washes her hair slowly, and a wave of weariness hits her

so hard that her knees buckle and she nearly loses her balance.

She manages to stumble out of the shower, dry her hair and pull on some clothes before there are two knocks on the door to her quarters. Yawning into her hand, Angela crosses the room and pulls the door open.

Fareeha stands on the other side, the ends of her hair still damp. "I'm – not sure why I..." Her voice trails off and she looks at Angela, and waits.

"Come in," Angela murmurs, and stands aside to allow Fareeha into her room. She closes the door quietly, yawns into her hand again, and then says, "This is normal, you know."

"Seeking out your partner?"

"Mm. Especially after fighting the Kaiju." She steps closer and admits, "I was going to come and see you."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"That's a relief." Fareeha rubs her neck with a wince. "I was hoping that I wouldn't bother you."

Honestly, Angela tells her, "You could never." Fareeha's tired smile makes her feel oddly warm. "Does your neck hurt?"

"It's nothing to worry about. Just tension."

Angela bites back a sigh. She gestures to the bed. "Sit there."

"That's awfully forward of you, Angela," Fareeha murmurs in a certain tone, moving over to the neatly-made bed and sitting on the edge.

Fareeha has a habit of surprising Angela, she is discovering. They're both weary and somehow – *somehow* – Fareeha finds the energy to flirt.

Angela nearly stumbles. *Flirt. She's flirting with me.*

That...

...explains a bit, really.

"You think?" Angela asks, crawling onto the bed and sitting behind Fareeha. She places her hands on Fareeha's neck and gently begins to work her thumbs into the tense muscles there. "Relax your shoulders a little. That's better."

She continues to work the tension out of Fareeha's muscles, trying to keep her weariness at bay. She moves her thumbs in small circles, releasing knots of tension and pressing into firm muscle. Fareeha relaxes under her hands. A few minutes pass, and Fareeha murmurs, "You have amazing hands, you know that?"

"Ah, and who is being forward now?"

Her partner groans. "That wasn't what I – oh, *ha ha*. Good one."

"Thank you," Angela says wryly. She feels another yawn rising up, and regretfully removes her hands from Fareeha's shoulders to stifle the sign of her weariness. "That will have to do for now, I

think. I'm about to fall asleep."

"Mm." Fareeha turns to face her, seeming a bit hesitant. "You don't mind if I stay?"

"I would thank you very much if you did." Angela smiles tiredly. "Rangers do usually share rooms, after all."

They end up in bed together, legs intertwined, Fareeha's face pressed into Angela's neck.

They both sleep peacefully.

Come morning, Angela wakes before Fareeha does. They've both moved during the night, and Fareeha is now on her back, taking up most of the bed. She's also taken most of the blankets. Angela sighs, checks the time – 06:14 – and then sits up on one elbow to gaze down at Fareeha.

Her face is peaceful, lips slightly parted. She still looks tired, though she is certainly less weary than she was last night, and there is no crease between her eyebrows.

Angela glances down, where Fareeha's dog tags sit on her chest, bright and new, their surface unscratched and unworn. They've only been recently minted, after all – new tags to match her new rank.

PPDC RANGER R-38-0042| AMARI, FAREEHA | B NEG

JAEGER – MARK-3 – SENTINEL BRAVE

B NEG. Angela's tags say B POS.

Angela returns her gaze to Fareeha's face, and is surprised to find a pair of dark brown eyes sleepily regarding her.

"Were you staring at my chest?" asks Fareeha, voice slightly husky.

"Your dog tags," Angela murmurs, clearing her throat. "Did you sleep well?"

"Mm." Fareeha stretches out and sighs. "Did you?"

"Very well, considering that you took most of the blankets."

"Sorry." A beat. A slow smile spreads across Fareeha's lips. "Are you *sure* you weren't staring at my chest?"

Angela groans and gets out of bed.

They go to breakfast, and eat mountains of food: toast, scrambled eggs, porridge and fruit. Angela drinks three cups of coffee. Fareeha doesn't bother getting herself a drink, instead stealing mouthfuls of Angela's coffee.

Genji watches them with a smile on his face.

“So. You and Fareeha. Platonic or not? I am saying no.”

Fareeha’s checking on the progress of the repairs to Sentinel Brave. Angela’s walking through the Shatterdome with Genji, and comes to a sudden stop at his words.

“Angela?” He stops too and raises an eyebrow. “Well?”

“*Mein Gott*,” she says, and the realisation that has been trickling through her mind suddenly floods through her. *Platonic or not?* It’s either one or the other. It was always exceedingly obvious that she and Genji were platonic: he was gay, and besides that, she preferred women to men. But Fareeha...Fareeha with her *flirting* and her *smiles* and the way that she *says* things. And Angela... Angela likes the flirting. She likes the way that Fareeha looks at her. She...*likes* Fareeha.

She breathes in and pinches the bridge of her nose between forefinger and thumb. “Ana is going to kill me,” she groans. “Oh my gosh....”

Genji gives her a sympathetic look. “Ana will understand,” he reassures.

Angela thinks that Ana might kill her.

Ana never wanted Fareeha to be a Jaeger pilot.

What will she think of *this*, whatever it is?

Jack and Gabriel are playing basketball in the sports court against Aleks and Mei. Ana is sitting on one of the benches set against a wall, filling out paperwork and muttering under her breath.

She glances up when she sees Genji and Angela enter the court, and manages a stiff smile. She’s never liked paperwork. “Good morning.”

“How is your arm?” Genji asks, while Angela wonders if Ana will be able to look at her and *know*.

Nothing has happened, she tells herself. *How could she know? Fareeha and I are partners. We pilot a Jaeger together. A certain degree of closeness and familiarity is expected.* But then her stomach twists. *This is Ana Amari. She knows things. She always knows. And we slept in the same bed. She’s going to know that I slept in the same bed as her daughter.*

“...Angela?” comes Ana’s voice. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Angela says, mustering a smile. “I was just thinking.”

“I understand.” Ana looks at the four Rangers playing basketball and her features settle into grimness. “I understand. I really do.”

Fareeha gets a tattoo. A single tally mark for the one Kaiju she has killed.

It’s tradition.

Angela gets her ninth tally mark.

.

They will both remember the name Otachi forever.

.

Ana and Gabriel get another tally mark each for killing Leatherback.

Ana has seventeen, now, and Gabriel has sixteen.

No other Ranger has killed as many of the Kaiju as Ana.

.

The scientist who Drifted with a Kaiju brain does it *again* and reveals that only the Kaiju can pass through the Breach. Another meeting is called – Winston quickly tells them that he doesn't think that more Kaiju are about to burst through the Breach and hunt the young man down. "There was a gap of five days, last time," Winston reassures. "And we were expecting those two Kaiju anyway."

"And your calculations?" Satya says abruptly, as though she is reminding him of something.

Winston's face falls even further. "A triple event, I fear, in two weeks."

The Jaegers will be repaired, before then, and they will have attempted to close the Breach. Still. A *triple* event. Three Kaiju at once.

Gabriel mutters something about locking the young scientist up into a cell. Jack is stone-faced. Ana looks imperious and deadly.

Then the topic of discussion turns to the young scientist's findings: that only Kaiju can pass through the Breach. It might very well cause a problem for their plan.

"Wait," Angela says suddenly. "The Breach must *recognise* the Kaiju, somehow, if only they are able to pass through. So, what if..."

"...we go through with a Kaiju?" Fareeha finishes.

Satya and Winston consider this and begin to talk rapidly.

.

"It's very possible," Winston says, five minutes later. Satya is nodding. "Very possible. If the Breach reads their genetic code, for instance..."

"If one were to latch onto a Kaiju and ride it through the Breach," Satya murmurs when he trails off, "then perhaps – perhaps yes."

Angela does not miss the way that Jack and Gabriel glance at each other.

.

Days pass.

Fareeha spends her nights in Angela's room and sprawls across most of the bed and steals most of

the covers. Once, with a grumpy sigh, she reaches over in her sleep and – gently enough – pushes Angela out of her own bed.

It's awfully endearing. Angela scowls at her sleeping partner tiredly, then crawls back under the covers, presses her cold feet against Fareeha's calves, and smirks in victory when Fareeha grumbles and stirs.

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Days pass and the repairs on the three Jaegers continue.

The construction of the bomb progresses rapidly.

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The atmosphere of the Shatterdome grows a little grimmer each day.

.

Angela rings Reinhardt and they talk. He's always been a shrewd man, and he asks, "Is this a goodbye?"

"It...I hope it isn't." She sighs. "I want to make sure that we all live...but I'm not sure how."

"If there is a way," Reinhardt tells her, "then you will find it, Angela. I know you will."

.

Mirembe says, "You've always been a fighter, Angela, even if sometimes you didn't think it. I know that you can bring them all back alive."

.

They've endured enough hardships in their lives.

What if Gabriel and Jack and Aleks and Mei got to live in a world without Kaiju? What if they could wake up each morning and think, *we closed the Breach*. What if they could go to sleep each evening without worrying about an impending Kaiju attack?

They deserve all that and so much more.

And she needs to bring them all back. She *has* to.

She can't let them die.

.

They run.

Not *away* from things. They run for solitude and calm.

They run, because in the act of running, there's a steady rhythm to be found. Left foot, right foot. Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Fareeha Amari run together, side by side, in perfect synchronisation.

Days pass. Angela has a long talk with Genji, one evening.

“Maybe all of you will come back,” he says calmly. “It’s entirely possible. You and Fareeha have pulled off one incredible stunt already: why not another?”

Somehow, a journalist gets wind of this mission, and suddenly newspapers are declaring ***ONE LAST STAND FOR THE JAEGER PROGRAM: SIX RANGERS SET OUT TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE.***

The PPDC is asked to comment. They don’t say much – they certainly don’t try to stop the mission – and barely any other information is released.

They’re all glad for that.

And then, just like that, it’s the night before they set out upon their mission.

There’s something of a grim little party. Jesse does a good job of brightening everyone’s spirits – he’s always been good at that – and he declares that Genji has set him up on a date: with Hanzo.

“Hanzo is *so* cute,” he drawls wistfully. “Genji showed me pictures.”

“I’m going to send this Hanzo pictures of you passed out drunk in a parking lot,” Gabriel declares. “Genji – what’s Hanzo’s email?”

“*Don’t* ruin this for me!”

“Send Hanzo the photo of Jesse in those little gold shorts,” Ana suggests slyly.

Gabriel hoots. Jesse gapes in horror and says, “You have photos of that?”

The party finishes up early. Aleks and Mei leave first, no doubt wishing to spend some private time together. Fareeha goes to send some emails. Jack and Gabriel head off to check on Shadow Spectre and discuss something.

Angela leaves and doesn’t head to her quarters.

Angela waits outside of the room assigned to Ana and Gabriel, standing with her feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped loosely behind her back.

Ana comes marching down the hallway ten minutes later. Her eyes lock onto Angela’s and narrow. She approaches, footsteps echoing sharply down the hall, and comes to an abrupt stop before Angela.

Then Ana grabs Angela by the shoulder with her one good arm, and shoves Angela until her back is pressed against the cold metal wall.

“That’s my daughter,” Ana snarls, low and fierce and *torn*. “Your partner is my daughter. My *Fareeha*.”

“I know,” Angela says, softly, quietly.

Ana’s fingers tighten. “My only child. My *daughter*. She – I cannot – I cannot have her die. I can’t be out there to watch her back. Do you understand?”

Angela understands, as best as she possibly can. She’s been the last Ziegler since she was eighteen. She knows what it’s like to live with the knowledge that you are the last of your family.

She does not, however, know the love that a parent feels for their child. And she cannot *truly* understand. Ana knows this.

“Yes,” Angela says. “I will make sure she comes back, Ana. For you, and for Zareen.”

“Good.” Ana’s voice is rough. Her eyes are hard. “Good.” She suddenly drops her hand, fingers curling into a fist, and Angela briefly wonders if Ana means to punch her.

Then Ana is hugging her, fierce and tight. “You cannot die either,” she whispers hoarsely. “Alright?”

“I—”

“I never told you this.” Something in Ana’s voice – *pain* – makes her shut up and listen. “When the rescue helicopter arrived at the hospital after you fought Knifehead, we knew that both of you were alive. We knew that Genji wasn’t in good shape. We knew that you had piloted alone for fifteen minutes.” Then Ana draws back, and looks Angela in the eyes. “The doctors did not think that you would live for long. Some pilots managed to cling to life for an hour or so after piloting alone. Then they slipped away – the trauma, or a seizure, or a haemorrhage. The doctors told us of Genji’s condition and I knew that he would make it. It would be hard, but he would make it.

“And you...you, Angela, I thought that you might die. I had piloted alone for a long time. Twenty minutes. I was an irregularity. They told me I should have died. I looked at you, and I hoped that you could cling to life, but I feared...that we would lose you. I hoped and I prayed that you would live; I counted each passing minute and I began to think: she’s going to make it. And you *did*. Within four days you were running – and tearing the stitches in your arm – and I was so happy and incredulous that I cried. Gabriel and I, we both cried.”

“You never told me,” Angela whispers. She had never known.

Ana laughs hoarsely. “We have never been the sort to admit when we cry, Angela. You know this.” She draws Angela close and rests their foreheads together. “I need you to be just as strong as you were when you piloted Sentinel Brave alone. Can you do that?”

“I will do it for Fareeha,” Angela tells Ana, “and for you and Zareen, and Genji, and everyone else.”

“Good.” Ana’s eyes are shining with tears. Angela’s are blurry. “Good. Thank you, Angela. Thank you, *habibti*.”

Angela knows the meaning of that word.

And upon hearing that – *habibti* – she, at last, begins to cry.

Fareeha finds them standing in the hallway and quietly crying, and she wraps them both in her arms and holds them tightly. She whispers reassurances, and says that it will all be alright, that

they will come back, that they can do this. Fareeha proudly bears an Udjat beneath her right eye: this is who she is – a protector, a warrior, a guardian.

Angela believes her. Angela believes in Fareeha.

Fareeha says, “We will close the Breach.”

Angela thinks, *yes. Yes, we will.*

Later, in Angela’s quarters, Fareeha takes Angela’s hands in her own and holds them gently.

“Whatever happens tomorrow...” Fareeha’s voice is rough. “Know this: even though we have only been partners for a short time, I have come to care for you a great deal. You are more than a friend to me, Angela.” She takes a deep breath, still holding Angela’s gaze. “You are a partner. My co-pilot. More than that, even.”

“Oh, Fareeha,” Angela murmurs. “Thank you for telling me. I...” Suddenly she’s not sure what to say. “I...care for you too. More than I had expected to. In...in a different manner than I had expected to. I want to thank you. For – for challenging me. For becoming my partner.”

“It is not something that needs thanks,” says Fareeha, her dark eyes gentle.

They do not kiss. The time is not right for that.

They do, however, spend a long time in each other’s arms, each breathing in the scent of other, taking comfort in their presence and their warmth and their realness.

In each other, they find equilibrium.

They sleep as well as they can, all things considered.

And then, just like that, it’s the day of their mission.

They go to breakfast. The air in the mess hall is heavy and grim. Everyone knows what they’re about to attempt, what they’re putting on the line.

Angela eats her breakfast robotically and makes sure that everyone else eats.

Then there’s one final briefing. Winston reports that two Kaiju have crawled from the Breach and are now circling it, waiting, keeping guard. They’re waiting for the Jaegers. Both are Category IVs: one has been codenamed Raiju, the other Scunner.

And then, just like that, it’s time to go.

The six of them get suited up in the Drivesuit Room, with technicians helping them into the circuitry suits, and then securely fastening the polycarbonate armour over the top. Ana and Genji watch on, the two of them quiet and reserved.

Once she is fully armoured, Aleks bends over and kisses Mei upon the lips. The others look away

to give them some measure of privacy.

Mei murmurs, “I bought the land, last night. Two hundred acres.”

Aleks laughs quietly. “Many trees?” she asks hopefully.

“Lots. There is a small hill, and it snows quite a lot. You will love it.”

“Of course I will,” Aleks declares, fierce and loving. “We will build that big cabin we have always dreamed of with our own hands, and it will be *ours*.”

Tenderly, Mei says, “We will, my love, and it will be wonderful.”

Before they leave to get into the Jaegers, Ana holds Fareeha for a long time and whispers to her in Arabic. Fareeha murmurs back reassuringly and smiles when Ana traces the Udjat under her right eye.

Then everyone hugs each other, one last time. Jesse wishes them all the best in a voice that croaks. “I’ll be watchin’ over you,” he says.

“I know you will,” Gabriel replies, and hugs him again, reaching up to ruffle Jesse’s hair fondly. “You’re the best LOCCENT Officer there is.”

Angela, meanwhile, embraces Jack fiercely. She remembers the moment they first met, outside that university classroom in Zurich. Eight years ago, almost. And here they are, the remnants of the Jaeger program, about to attempt the impossible.

“Thank you,” Jack says quietly. “Thank you for coming back when I asked you to. Thank you for doing this.”

“I meant what I said, Jack,” she replies, and is surprised at the strength in her voice. “You don’t need to thank me.”

He draws back and looks into her eyes. “I do, though, Angela. I really do.”

She claps him on the back in the way that Rangers do: firm, reassuring, grounding, and says, “I have to thank you too.”

He frowns, after hearing that. “No, you don’t.”

“I do,” she assures him. “All I ever wanted was to help people. You showed me a way to make a difference, Jack. You showed me how I could help. And...and it was only because of you that I met Genji. That I met Fareeha.” Angela glances over at the others and smiles gently. “It was only because of you that I met all of them.”

Jack’s face softens. “You’re a good Ranger, Angela. One of the best. It’s been an honour to serve with you.”

“It’s been an honour to serve under you, sir.”

Then they step away. Genji takes Jack’s place, and reaches out to cup her jaw with his flesh-and-bone hand. They stand quietly for a moment, two old partners, one about to watch the other leave to do the impossible.

Genji says, “Come back, Angela. And if you can...bring everyone back.”

“I will.” Her lips twitch into a faint teasing smile. “We have to watch you get married to Zenyatta, don’t we?”

He laughs. “You will be my best woman, of course.”

“Of course I will.” She swallows and feels a lump in her throat. “Thank you, Genji, for coming back. I know that it was hard for you.”

“You do not have to thank me,” he says calmly. “It’s what partners do. And besides,” now his eyes are dancing, “did you even really need me?”

Perhaps she wouldn’t have. Yet the fact remains that Genji’s presence has made all of *this* so much easier.

“Of course I did,” Angela says. “I needed all of you, I think.”

Then Winston hands Angela her helmet, claps her on the shoulder, and moves on. It’s time. Ana kisses Fareeha upon each cheek, and then kisses Gabriel in the same manner. Angela holds her helmet under one arm and looks at them all: at Gabriel and Jack, at Aleks and Mei, at Ana and Fareeha, Jesse and Winston and Satya.

“Bring them home, Angela,” Genji tells her.

“I will,” she replies, and means it.

Angela and Fareeha step into Sentinel Brave’s conn-pod and look at each other.

“We’re going to do this,” Fareeha tells her firmly. “We *will* succeed, Angela.”

When you can Drift with someone – and Drift *well* – it feels like you can achieve anything. Like you can run a thousand miles without stopping, like you can race the wind itself, like you can walk into the fiercest battle and fight your way through it and come out unscathed.

It’s like...

...oh, it’s like you can achieve the impossible.

“We will,” Angela says. “And we will bring everyone home too.”

And with that, they clasp hands fiercely, before securing themselves into the piloting mechanisms.

The Jaegers are lifted into the air by V-50 Jumphawks flying in teams of four. Sturdy cables are attached to a team of Jumphawks, and then to the shoulder of a Jaeger. There are eight Jumphawks for each Jaeger: sixteen in all, and the sound of the twin rotor aircraft is nearly deafening.

The Jaegers rise up from the Shatterdome in a way that defies belief. And then, born aloft by the Jumphawks, they set off across the ocean and towards the Breach. It lays in Challenger Deep, which is the deepest point of the Mariana Sea Trench.

The Jaegers are lifted into the air, and a large crowd watches them go: doctors and nurses, engineers and mechanics, scientists and technicians. At the front of the crowd stand Ana, Genji,

Jesse, Satya and Winston. Satya and Winston raise their hands in grave farewell. Jesse holds his hat over his heart. Genji and Ana both salute.

They reach the drop point.

Angela and Fareeha enter the Drift. The Neural Handshake is initiated and they become one with Sentinel Brave.

“It’s time,” Ana says over the communications channel. *“Are you ready?”*

“Yes, Mama Bear,” Fareeha says as Angela flicks several switches to close all of the Jaeger’s ports. *“All ports sealed. Ready to submerge.”*

Gabriel reports that he and Jack are ready too. Aleks grumbles and asks if they can just get on with it.

The Jumphawks release them.

Three Jaegers are dropped into the ocean and sink beneath the surface of the water. The water grows darker and darker all around them the further they sink, till they have barely any visibility at all. Sand and silt cloud the water when they land upon the ocean floor, and given the lack of visibility, all Jaegers activate their instruments.

With his typical rough sarcasm, Gabriel begins to sing.

*“Under the sea
Under the sea
Darlin’ it’s better
Down where it’s wetter
Take it from me.”*

The five other Rangers all laugh quietly and a little grimly.

They’re four hundred metres from the Breach when the first Kaiju slams into Shadow Spectre, sending the Jaeger stumbling through the water.

“Keep it off us!” Jack barks out. *“We can’t let it near the bomb!”*

Sentinel Brave lurches through the water, left chain sword gleaming in what faint light there is. The Kaiju – the one called Raiju – is serpentine in form and surges through the ocean quickly, twisting around before heading straight at Sentinel Brave. It collides into the Jaeger and rakes its claws into the Sentinel Brave’s shoulders, searching for purchase, attempting to rip and tear, to *disable*.

They punch the monster with Sentinel Brave’s right fist, a cruel hook that makes the Kaiju *screech* in that awful discordant way. Then the chain sword flashes through the water and Fareeha growls, *“For Zareen!”* as the blade she calls Raptora opens up a cruel gash in the Kaiju’s side. Raiju screeches again and releases the Jaeger, but Sentinel Brave grabs on with its right fist and thrusts the sword forward, piercing deep into the Kaiju’s belly. Angela and Fareeha yank their left arms up, cutting a long and savage wound into Raiju and disembowelling the creature in one fell cut.

“*We’ve got company!*” shouts Gabriel and then Scunner is launching itself out of the gloom and at Winter Brawler, lashing out viciously.

Raiju thrashes and sinks down into a cleft in the ocean floor, organs and blood spilling from the grievous wound stretching up its belly. Sentinel Brave steps towards Winter Soldier to assist, and suddenly Jesse is speaking to them over the communications channel.

“*Movement in the Breach. It’s a big fuckin’ Kaiju - Category Five.*”

They hear Winston’s voice, torn and soft. “*So I was right.*”

.

The third Kaiju claws its way out of the Breach and rises *up* like some kind of abyssal demon, a monstrosity of the most terrible kind.

The six Rangers curse as one.

.

Jesse calls the Category V *Slatern*.

Slatern is easily twice the size of Scunner and towers over the Jaegers. It strikes out at Shadow Spectre viciously and hurls the Jaeger back through the water, almost like a cat toying with a mouse before making the decision to end its life.

Sentinel Brave charges forward.

“*Be careful!*” Ana warns. “*That thing’s too big to grapple with!*”

They grit their teeth and dodge to the side as Slatern lashes at them with a monstrous arm. Winter Brawler is still grappling with Scunner, landing solid and brutal punches to the Kaiju’s head and chest, but it still manages to hold onto them. Aleks shouts something – a blend of Russian and Mandarin – and Winter Brawler folds one of its arms over Scunner’s, grips onto its flesh, and twists. Then the Jaeger *jerks*, and Scunner’s arm bends unnaturally – unnaturally, even for a Kaiju – and the remaining Category IV screams so loudly that even Jack and Gabriel curse, a hundred metres away.

Slatern lashes out again. Sentinel Brave ducks beneath the blow and moves in closer. “If we can get in,” Angela shouts, “and stab it in the heart, then we might be able to kill it like that!”

She feels and hears Fareeha agree with her. Then Slatern turns away from them, the movement oddly familiar – confusion flashes through Fareeha’s mind and Angela remembers Hammertail, the Kaiju she and Genji fought near Graham Island off the coast of Canada, she remembers the way the Kaiju had turned and –

“The *tail!*” she shouts desperately and they try to leap away, but it’s too late – the Jaeger is moving too slowly in the water and Slatern is brutally fast, wickedly fast, *deadly* fast.

The Category V Kaiju’s tail whips through the water and slams into Sentinel Brave’s side with all the force of an explosion, and sends them surging back and back and *back* through the water, arms flailing helplessly, till they collide with a tall outcropping of rock. Sandy water surges around the Jaeger and obscures everything from view as they attempt to right themselves.

“Are you alright?” Fareeha asks. Angela feels her concern through the Drift.

Angela breathes in. Her ribs hurt a little, but she ignores the pain. “Yes. Are you?”

“I’m fine – starting to get a bit *angry*.”

“Aren’t we both?” asks Angela, and laughs grimly.

They manage to get their feet under them and Sentinel Brave rises up, the A.I. informing them of slight damage to the left arm and leg. They take a step forward, and then another, and step free of the murky water.

Before them, Winter Brawler is stretched out between Scunner and Slattern, arms taut and straining as the two Kaiju attempt to tear the Jaeger’s arms from its body. Shadow Spectre is lunging towards Winter Brawler, both of its wrist-mounted Sting-Blades drawn, yet Shadow Spectre is too far away and will not make it in time.

Mei says, “*You fucking-*”

Suddenly, the arms tear away. Slattern screeches in triumph. Near defenceless, Winter Brawler staggers back, and Aleks and Mei scream as one. Shadow Spectre leaps through the water and is knocked aside almost carelessly by Slattern. Scunner pounces onto Winter Brawler and knocks it to the ocean floor.

“*It’s going to finish us!*” Aleks shouts. “*We can blast it with the vents—*”

“Don’t do that!” Angela replies fiercely. She and Fareeha are moving as fast as they can. “You know what happens if you do that! Just get to the escape pods!”

“Ziegler, you lovely optimist, *I don’t think that will make a difference,*” Mei says sadly. “*Scunner is waiting for that. It will kill us all the same.*”

“*If we’re going to die,*” says Aleks, “*then let it be in this Jaeger.*”

No, Angela thinks desperately as Sentinel Brave charges over. *No no no. I’m going to bring you home. We’re all leaving here alive today. There has to be –*

“The bomb,” murmurs Fareeha. “What if—”

Her mother beats her to the punch. “*Detonate the bomb!*” Ana snaps over the communications channel suddenly. “*NOW!*”

“*Get down!*” shouts Gabriel. Shadow Spectre is rising up, reaching for the somehow-undamaged bomb on its back. The Jaeger unhooks the device and takes two quick steps, gripping the device in its right hand and lining up the shot. “*Get down, Sentinel!*”

Shadow Spectre hurls the device through the water.

Angela and Fareeha crouch down, using the Raptora as an anchor, embedding it deep into the rock. Slattern whips around and catches the device in its mouth, somehow fooled into thinking that it was something other than a weapon.

The bomb goes off and the resulting shockwave slams into Sentinel Brave with a truly immense force. They hold on, somehow – the Jaeger’s joints creak and groan and Angela whispers, “Come on, old girl,” and Fareeha says, “You can do it!”

And then the force dissipates at last, and an eerie sort of quiet and calm is left in its wake, almost like a void.

The communications channel crackles with static. Someone's communicator has been damaged. "We're alive," Jack says. "*Winter Brawler?*"

"We're alive," Mei replies, and then laughs incredulously. "We're alive."

"*Sentinel Brave?*" comes Gabriel's voice, sharp and worried. "*Sentinel Brave?*"

"We're alive." Sentinel Brave slowly gets to its feet. "We're alive," Fareeha repeats.

Then Ana's voice is in their ears. "*Shadow Spectre, our readings say that your nuclear core is overheating and reaching critical levels.*" Her voice is taut. "*You have to evacuate that Jaeger now.*"

Jack makes a sound of disagreement. "*But we—*"

"You can't help us now," Angela says quietly. She glances over to Fareeha, who nods, eyes firm and assured. "It's down to us, now. Go, Gabriel and Jack."

They watch as two escape pods launch free of Shadow Spectre and float up towards the distant surface of the ocean. Another two from Winter Brawler follow, bright silver and almost seeming like fish as they make their way up through the water, gleaming with faint light.

"So," Gabriel says flatly. "*How the fuck are you going to get into the Breach now? Just wait for another Kaiju to come through?*"

Slattern and Scunner have been pulverised by the blast. There isn't a great deal remaining of them: some fragments of horn and bone floating through the water.

A glob of purple tissue floats past Sentinel Brave's head. Fareeha and Angela glance down and breathe in sharply together.

"I think," Angela says, "That we have just found our answer."

Raiju, still clinging to life in that little cleft in the ocean floor, has escaped the bomb blast without gaining more injuries.

Sentinel Brave bends down, grabs the grievously injured Kaiju, and begins to drag it towards the Breach.

Fareeha and Angela begin to plan.

"Do you think that we can make it?" Fareeha asks.

They can hear Satya and Winston murmuring in the background. Jesse murmurs, "*My fingers are crossed for you.*"

There's a lull in the background conversation. Then, clearly, Satya says, "*You will have to be fast. Very fast. The escape pods should rise in an almost straight line, so as long as you fall straight...*"

Yes. We think that you can make it."

There's silence.

"*Alright,*" Ana says heavily. "*Do it. Fareeha....*"

"I'm coming home, mama," Fareeha assures. "Don't worry."

She will come back, Ana, Angela thinks fiercely. The Breach is before them, a glowing abyss, a portal to another dimension. Raiju is still twitching weakly, blood streaming from the gaping wound stretching the length of her belly. *I will make sure of it.*

"*Alright,*" Ana echoes, and then there is silence.

"Are you ready for this?" Angela asks. She *has* to ask, has to hear it from Fareeha's lips, even though she already knows the answer. "We cannot go back, once we step through."

"I'm your partner," Fareeha replies, and smiles that wonderful crooked smile of hers. "I'm with you every step of the way."

Sentinel Brave steps out into the abyss and falls into another dimension.

They leave just as Shadow Spectre explodes on the ocean floor.

The Anteverse is unnatural. Things move in the distance, upon pillars of rock and floating stone. Things that aren't Kaiju, but their masters and creators. Sentinel Brave drifts down slowly, releasing Raiju as it falls.

Angela and Fareeha leave the Drift and disconnect themselves from the operating mechanisms of the Jaeger. They climb down out of the conn-pod and into the heart of the Jaeger, where the nuclear core hums along steadily.

Fareeha crouches down by a hatch in the metal floor and swings it open. Within is a red handle, and written around it in bold letters are the following words: **MANUAL SELF DESTRUCT.**
TIMER: 60 SECONDS.

Angela presses her hand against the warm metal wall and whispers, "You did the impossible, old friend. I'm going to miss you. She is, too."

Then she steps over to Fareeha and crouches down beside her. Together, they place their hands on the handle, raise it up and twist it ninety degrees clockwise, before pushing it down again.

"This is for Zareen," Angela murmurs quietly.

"Yes," Fareeha says. "Yes. It is. And for Earth itself."

"Self destruct sequence: activated," the Jaeger's A.I. informs them. "Immediate evacuation is advised. Goodbye."

.

They race back up into the conn-pod and lock themselves back into the operating mechanisms as quickly as they can, but do not return to the Drift. Angela reaches over to her control panel, fingers brushing over the two pilot evacuation buttons.

She presses the left one first. Fareeha's operating mechanism lifts her up to the ceiling of the conn-pod, placing her securely in one of the two evac pods. Steel doors slide shut with a hiss. Then there's the loud blast of the evac pod's thrusters burning into life, shooting the pod up and away from the Jaeger.

"Left pilot evacuation pod successfully launched," says Sentinel Brave's A.I. "Thirty seconds left until self destruct sequence commences. Immediate evacuation is advised."

Angela presses the right button.

"Goodbye, old friend," she says, and breathes out as the operating mechanism lifts her up and deposits her in the evac pod. It seals shut with a hiss, and the thrusters roar into life, and then the evac pod suddenly lurches up and away from Sentinel Brave.

Please let us make it, she thinks. Please.

.

"Goodbye, old friend," Angela whispers, as the escape pod lurches back up to the portal.

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There's a faint roar from below that grows louder and louder and louder and then—
— silence.

.

It's silent for a long time.

Angela taps the communicator attached to the side of her helmet but there's no response.

.

She breathes in.

And out.

And in.

And out.

And in.

And out.

.

The evac pod begins to move, rocking around slowly and gently.

Then the top of it opens and there is light, blinding light, so bright that she cannot see. Angela

blinks and reaches up to take her helmet off. Calm and gentle hands assist her. She sits up, shades her eyes from the sun, and sees Fareeha sitting astride the top of the evac pod, grinning brightly at her.

“We did it?” Angela asks, wondering if this is perhaps some kind of afterlife. She blinks.

Fareeha pulls her out of the evac pod and into her arms. “We did it,” she says into Angela’s neck. “We *did* it. We’re *alive*.”

Angela clings to her partner, to Fareeha, and murmurs, “So we are.”

Sentinel Brave is gone. The evac pod bobs gently on the surface of the water. Angela brushes a strand of hair out of her face and behind one ear, and then Fareeha’s kissing her, sudden and awkward.

Angela’s so surprised that she slips off the emergency pod and into the cold water. It’s so cold and sudden that she yelps in surprise. “*Mein Gott*,” she curses as Fareeha hauls her back onto the pod. “Some warning would have been nice.” Water quickly is soaking into her circuitry suit, hardly the most pleasant of sensations.

Fareeha blinks at her, and suddenly awkward, says, “I’m sorry, I just...”

“Kiss me again.”

Her partner stares at her with wide eyes. “What?”

Angela stares at her and takes her in: Fareeha Amari, tall and broad-shouldered, beautiful and striking, hair still slightly messy from her Drivesuit helmet. This is Fareeha Amari, one half of the whole that piloted Sentinel Brave, Angela’s partner, an absolutely incredible Ranger. This is Fareeha Amari, who led the rebuilding of Sentinel Brave, who stepped into another dimension to help save the world.

Angela’s heart swells in her chest, and she wonders if it might burst from the amount of love held within. “I mean, only if you want to,” she says, and though her words are teasing, her eyes are honest and speak of the overwhelming emotion that she feels.

Love.

Fareeha sighs with relief and pulls her close, and mutters, “You are *impossible*,” before capturing Angela’s lips with her own. They kiss, sitting astride Angela’s evac pod, Fareeha’s bobbing in the water nearby, barely conscious of the team of PPDC helicopters approaching.

They kiss, and it’s many things, but most of all, it’s equilibrium.

Fareeha calls her *habibti* and Angela’s heart skips two beats before it settles back into rhythm.

They’re winched up into a helicopter and Jack and Gabriel are waiting for them, tired and weary and *laughing* with joy. They fall into a sort of huddle, a hug shared between four people, and

none of them talk for a little while, just happy to hold onto each other.

“Aleks and Mei made it,” Gabriel says suddenly. He pulls away and gestures out the side of the helicopter: Angela and Fareeha turn around, and Aleks and Mei are waving from a nearby helicopter, Mei with an arm in a sling and Aleks with a tremendous black eye. “We all made it. And the Breach is closed. You *did* it.”

Angela glances back at him quickly. “It is? Truly?”

“Just sealed right up,” Jack informs them. “We were talking to Ana when it happened – Jesse started screaming and shouting in the background.”

“You did it,” Gabriel repeats. “You fucking *did* it.”

“No,” Angela says, and lets out a weary little laugh. “We did. *We* did it.”

And they have.

They’ve pulled off the impossible.

The Breach is closed and everyone is alive. Gabriel and Jack are alive. Aleks and Mei alive. She and Fareeha are alive.

They’ve *done* it.

.

Gabriel hands Fareeha a radio and says, with a proud smile, “There’s someone who wants to talk to you.”

Fareeha takes it, and presses the button on the side. “Mama?” she asks. “Are you there?”

“*Habibti?*”

“We did it, mama.” Fareeha laughs shakily. “We’re alive.”

.

“*I knew you could do it,*” Genji says. “*I knew that all of you could do it. And now you can come home.*”

.

They return to the Shatterdome and a small crowd of doctors and medics greet them. Aleks announces that she is fine and would like a drink, please; Mei laughs and says that she has a broken arm and would also like a drink. Ana flies over to Fareeha and hugs her fiercely with one arm; Genji follows a second later and wraps his arms around Angela and spins her around gleefully.

Gabriel shouts, “*Jesse!* Where are you?” and Jesse lopez over, grin stretched wide across his face, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. Gabriel embraces him fiercely and roars with laughter. Jack shakes Winston’s hand, then Satya’s, and then staggers back when Jesse – who has left Gabriel, as Gabriel is now hugging Ana – crashes into him cheerfully.

It’s a happy scene. It’s a happy scene and Angela can’t quite believe this, that they’re here and the Breach is closed and everyone is alive.

It's the sort of thing that defies belief, but apparently she and Fareeha have a habit of achieving the impossible.

Genji hands Angela her phone and she steps away to ring Reinhardt.

He answers almost immediately, and asks in a voice that trembles, "*Angela? Is that really you?*"

"It is," she says, and begins to cry, at last.

Then Mirembe's voice is in her ear. "*Are you alright?*"

"I'm fine," she tells them. "Just a bit tired. We all are. We did it. Oh my god." A doctor comes over, looking worried; she waves him away reassuringly. "You're in the same place?"

"*Angela,*" Reinhardt tells her, almost hesitantly, "*the whole world is celebrating. News of the Breach being closed has gone global. As soon as Mirembe saw the first broadcast on television, she came to my house. So did Kimiko.*"

She sniffs, and says, "You should all have a celebratory drink."

"*So should you,*" Reinhardt laughs. "*Ah, Angela – I'm so glad that you're alright. That you all are. Is your Jaeger...?*"

"Gone," Angela tells him, and it's bittersweet. "But that's alright. We won't need them, anymore, will we?"

They're whisked off to the medical bay, taken out of their Drivesuits and given the routine post-Kaiju fight checkup. The doctors seem amazed that Angela and Fareeha's interdimensional travel hasn't resulted in any odd effects. Mei's arm is splinted, Angela is told that she has two fractured ribs – Fareeha and Genji narrow their eyes at her simultaneously – and everyone is quite healthy, all considered.

There's a PPDC debrief which is mercifully short.

Angela and Fareeha sit side-by-side, holding hands. Occasionally, Fareeha leans over and makes a sly comment. "Why do they seem so amazed at us jumping through a portal?" "See how she keeps shaking her head?" "I think Aleks and Mei are about two seconds away from ripping off their clothes and...you get the picture, I see."

Angela giggles into her free hand and leans into Fareeha.

After that, Ana gives a very brief press conference with Jack. Yes, the Breach is closed. Yes, all Rangers survived. Yes, the Kaiju are gone. Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yes, you should stop building the Anti-Kaiju Wall.

Gabriel lunges out before the cameras and says with great venom, "That fucking wall was the biggest waste of money and effort. Everyone who supported that fucking thing should have listened to Satya Vaswani when she said that it *wouldn't fucking work*. But hey, you don't need it

anymore! I hope you're fucking thankful! We just lost our Jaegers! And to General Campbell – you can suck my fucking—”

Jesse clamps a hand over Gabriel's mouth and pulls him away. Jack and Ana bite their lips, hide smiles, and continue the conference as best as they can.

Jack checks his watch, and says to the journalists and officials, “If you'll excuse us, we can't be late for dinner.”

And so they leave.

“What are you going to do?” one journalist shouts at their retreating backs.

“Get drunk,” says Marshal Jack Morrison, while Ana Amari smirks at his side. “Thank you for your time.”

Here is how the heroes celebrate after saving the world:

They hire out a restaurant for a night. They eat good food, they drink alcohol, and they laugh.

They *laugh*. Their shoulders are lighter than they have been for a long time. There's still an air of disbelief that hangs around them. Have they really done it? Have they really achieved the impossible?

Yes.

Yes they have.

Angela heads outside the restaurant to get some air. She's alone for all of a minute before she hears footsteps crossing the balcony, heading in her direction.

“So,” Ana says, joining Angela at the balcony's edge. “You and Fareeha. I think, perhaps, it might be time for the shovel talk, no?”

Angela straightens up and turns to face Ana. Ana, who has been a mentor, a comrade, a superior, a friend. “Ana. Ma'am. I never intended—”

Then Ana is hugging her.

Angela's so startled that she doesn't know what to do, for a moment, and Ana says dryly, “This is the part where you hug me.”

“Oh.”

“It's alright, Angela,” Ana reassures. “It's alright. You brought her home. And...if you two make each other happy, then that is all that matters. Alright? I'm glad for the two of you. I really am.” Her arms tighten around Angela. “I already thought of you as family...but you are a daughter to me, now, *habibi*.”

Angela hugs her just as tightly in return, and says, her voice nearly cracking, “Thank you, Ana.”

They stand there like that for a long time.

“Zareen would have loved you,” Ana murmurs softly.

.

She and Fareeha fall into bed and are immediately asleep.

.

In the morning, Angela wakes to find Fareeha watching her quietly. She smiles and kisses Fareeha for a very long time, and they only break the kiss to shrug off the clothes they’d worn to bed, and they spend a long time learning each other’s bodies in an intimate matter, and stay in bed till 8am – which, for them, is very late.

.

Days pass and the war is over and it’s...

...hard to adjust to, honestly.

They have appointments with psychiatrists. It’s a routine thing.

There are more debriefs. A press conference where they all wear their formal uniforms. Jack and Ana, who have been working tirelessly, nearly fall asleep in the middle of it.

.

Jack and Gabriel, Aleks and Mei, and Angela and Fareeha all get another three tally marks tattooed onto their skin. They decide that they should all get three.

So, they get their tattoos.

It’s tradition.

Angela looks at the tally marks later and thinks, *there won’t be any more*.

.

The days pass.

They all have nightmares, and as bad as they are, there’s a certain comfort to be taken from the fact that they’ve done it: they’ve triumphed, the Breach is sealed and the Kaiju cannot threaten any more.

.

Angela goes back to Switzerland. Fareeha’s in Egypt with Ana, and Angela speaks to them every night.

Mirembe and Reinhardt hug her so fiercely that she thinks her healing ribs might break again.

.

She visits the graves of her parents and her grandmother and sits down for a long time, telling them everything that has happened.

She tells them about Fareeha, and says, fondly and lovingly, “You would love her.”

She flies back to Hong Kong in a PPDC plane.

Fareeha meets her at the airport and Angela can't help but to drop her suitcase and run across the tarmac, leaping into Fareeha's arms with a giddy laugh.

Fareeha kisses Angela on her mouth and her cheeks and on her brow, and then murmurs, "I'm so glad we're together again, *habibti*," before sealing their lips together again.

Jack and Ana, who have been sharing the position of Marshal, gladly hand over their duties to a young officer who does not seem to be worried by the fact that the PPDC is dissolving and that very soon he will not have a job.

"Our job is done," Ana says. "Now we have to learn to be normal people." Behind her, Gabriel rolls his eyes and tosses a knife into the air.

So, they pack their things. Jesse heads back to his little ranch and makes Gabriel and Ana promise to visit. Angela's going to go too – which means Fareeha will come as well – and Jack will probably end up there.

Genji heads back to Japan. Angela thanks him for everything.

He winks and says, "You owe me one, Ziegler."

"I do," she says, and stays to watch his plane take off into the sky.

Fareeha and Angela spend two weeks together in Egypt, and another two in Switzerland. They spend a week in Japan – Hanzo wants to know everything about Jesse, and Genji and Zenyatta are almost sickeningly sweet, and aren't engaged *just* yet, but soon, of course.

Then, of all places, they end up in Canada, where Ana and Gabriel and Jack are all living in a big farmhouse they've decided to rent out.

Here is what heroes do after saving the world:

They live together in a big airy house in Canada and they learn to exist normally. Angela and Fareeha think about moving out, but for now they are quite content here, with Ana and Gabriel and Jack.

Here is what heroes do after saving the world:

They rest.

They run.

Not *away* from things. They run for solitude and calm.

They run, because in the act of running, there's a steady rhythm to be found. Left foot, right foot.

Breathe in, breathe out. One two one two one two one two.

On and on and on and on.

Angela Ziegler and Fareeha Amari run together, side by side, in perfect synchronisation.

.

Together, Angela Ziegler and Fareeha Amari find equilibrium.

And that's something beautiful. Something poetic.

.

In another life, Angela Ziegler might have been a doctor.

In this life, she became a Ranger. A Jaeger pilot.

.

End Notes

Fun fact: eight Jumphawks have no fucking chance of lifting a Jaeger but it's a cool vision, right?

Also! The chain sword being called Raptora was a little shout-out to commander-roastedwolf and Wolf's amazing fic 'The Stars Our Destination.' I worship that fic.

Edit: my main tumblr blog is gravehelm.tumblr.com. I was going to try using a sideblog but I keep forgetting it's there....

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!